

REAL PEOPLE WITH HOLLYWOOD STORIES:
A COLLECTION OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

by

Brandon Sneed

November 2012

Director of Thesis: Alex Albright

Major Department: English

“Real People With Hollywood Stories” is a collection of creative journalism stories I’ve written to fulfill the requirements of the M.A. in English with a concentration in creative nonfiction. These are stories I discovered and had published or soon will have published in my work as a freelance journalist for *GQ*, *ESPN The Magazine*, and other media. My goal in life as a writer, presently as a journalist and in the future as both journalist and novelist, is to find fascinating stories of compelling real-life characters and tell them in a way that transports people away from the real world and their problems, even if only briefly, as any good story should. As a young man starting on this path, these stories were phenomenal examples of what I should not only look for as a storyteller, but look to employ in my own life.

REAL PEOPLE WITH HOLLYWOOD STORIES:
A COLLECTION OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

A Thesis

Presented To The Faculty of the Department of English
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
M.A. in English with a Concentration in Creative Nonfiction

by

Brandon Sneed

November 2012

© Brandon Sneed 2012

REAL PEOPLE WITH HOLLYWOOD STORIES:
A COLLECTION OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

by

Brandon Sneed

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF
DISSERTATION/THESIS: _____
Alex Albright, M.F.A.

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Luke Whisnant, M.F.A.

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Liza Wieland, Ph.D.

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF _____
Jeffrey Johnson, Ph.D.

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL _____
Paul J. Gemperline, Ph.D.

Dedicated to Katie Sneed, my wife and greatest inspiration

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm a pretty easily inspired guy, so there are always a ton of people to thank, but I'll try to keep this brief and immediate. I thank my wife, Katie. I thank my parents, Will and Karen Sneed. I thank Katie's parents, Albert and Susie Holloman. I thank my two younger brothers, Kramer and Logan, and my two younger sisters, Kara and Heidi. I thank Alex Albright, my thesis director, advisor, and my creative nonfiction professor. I thank Luke Whisnant and Liza Wieland, the second and third members of my thesis committee. I thank those editors and their publications who not only let me write these stories for them, who not only worked on them with me to make them as good as they could possibly be, but also paid me for them. I've had some wonderful opportunities at a young age. I hope my work reflects my gratitude.

And finally, I thank the subjects of these stories—opening your life to a stranger for him to tell the world about it sounds like an absolutely terrifying idea to me, and I'm ever grateful to them. Each of them, in their own ways, made life better, for me and I hope for many others.

CREDIT OF PUBLICATION

Starting in October 2011 and spanning until December 2012 and beyond, all of these stories have been or soon will be published by *ESPN The Magazine* and ESPN.com, with the exception of “Mad For Carolina,” which was published by *GQ*. “Blind Ambition” and “Nobody Walks Alone” have been published by *ESPN The Magazine*. “Love and Basketball and Nirra Fields” and “Life For Fighting” are under contract with *ESPN The Magazine* and ESPN.com to be published in the near future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Blind Ambition	1
Mad For Carolina	18
Nobody Walks Alone	30
Love and Basketball and Nirra Fields	41
Life For Fighting	59
References	81

BLIND AMBITION

JUST BEFORE SUNRISE, Captain Iván Castro feels his way across his hotel room to the bathroom sink. He stands before the mirror, his left eye wandering up and to the left, his right eyelid shut flat against an empty socket. He touches his right ear, then his sideburn. He shaves it, dry, a couple strokes down, a couple up. Repeats on the opposite side. Today, in particular, he wants to look good.

After the 44-year-old combs his salt-and-pepper hair, parted on the left, he sits down on his bed and dresses, the April morning light gleaming now off his stainless silver bracelet, the one bearing the names of Ralph Porras and Justin Dreese. He pulls on a dri-fit T-shirt with a U.S. Army Special Forces insignia. Above it is his name and the phrase "Blind Runner." Below it is another phrase: "I WILL NEVER QUIT."

And he won't, even though his knees and his back and his right hip ache, even though the marathon he'll run today, the most famous one, in Boston, will be his 14th in the past 15 months. Honestly, he thought about not making the trip from his home in Fort Bragg, N.C., but between backing out or running another marathon, backing out sounded worse. He gets asked a lot, *Why do you keep doing this? Pushing yourself? Alienating some of those closest to you?* The simplest answer: Backing out has always sounded worse.

And so Castro downs an Extra Strength Tylenol and waits. A few minutes later, he hears a knock at the door. Lt. Col. Michael P. Sullivan enters, wearing a matching shirt, only with the word "Guide" on the back.

"Hey there, sexiness," Castro says, grinning, his voice light and playful. "Lookin' good today."

Sullivan laughs.

"How'd you sleep?" Castro asks.

"Good, good. You?"

"Man, that 5 a.m. s--- comes too early."

Castro pulls on black sunglasses, then grabs his pack and his white-and-red-striped cane.

An hour later, he's riding in one of 16 buses filled with military and police, headed for the starting line and one of the toughest days of his life.

SIX YEARS AGO, Castro deployed to Iraq as a first lieutenant, leading a platoon for the 82nd Airborne Division. Toward the end of August 2006, he volunteered for an offensive operations mission to secure Yusufiyah, a small town about 25 miles southwest of Baghdad. He led three teams of snipers -- about 15 men total -- to provide overwatch security at a compound his battalion had occupied.

The afternoon of Sept. 1, the Americans came under heavy mortar fire while battling Iraqi insurgents from the roof of a one-story building within the compound. A guy named Mercado got ripped in half up there. As night fell and the fighting stopped, Castro was ordered to take four men -- a radio operator and three snipers -- and replace Mercado's team. On the lookout for potential threats, the soldiers crawled on the flat roof, and Castro took to the front beside Pfc. Justin Dreese and Staff Sgt. Ralph Porras. A muddy brick wall stood before them, and beyond that a dirt road, shrubs and other buildings as squalid-looking as the one they stood on. Everything was beige.

Castro let his men sleep in shifts. He knew the insurgents would only engage during the day, when they could better blend in with the civilians in the streets, houses and shops below.

"They won't attack at night," Castro said. "We own the night." When he could, he catnapped. In one dream he and his wife, Evelyn, lounged on the beach, margaritas in hand and the ocean at their toes.

Soon after sunrise, Castro sought safer ground. "Gonna be hot today," he said. He and Dreese and Porras stood near the spot where Mercado had died the day before, and Castro worried the mortars would soon find them again. He wanted to find a more secure spot within the compound where he could still battle insurgents.

He saw a ledge of a building under construction a football field away, at 4 o'clock. That's the spot, he thought. Castro picked up a radio to request permission to leave the roof, mashed the transmit button ...

A scream split the air, and then the earth exploded behind the building. The roof shook.

"Where'd that hit?" someone barked through the radio. "Where the f--- did that hit?"

Castro ignored him, screamed at Porras and Dreese. "Get off the roof! *Get off the f----- roof!*"

He never heard the second mortar land.

CASTRO HAS RUN Boston three times already. He'd like a time under four hours today -- a Boston best -- but at mid-morning, as he and Sullivan ride to the start of the race in Hopkinton, it's already 65 degrees. The high is supposed to reach the mid-80s.

"It's gonna be hot today," Castro says.

Sullivan agrees. "It's going to be interesting with that heat."

"Yeah man, I might run it naked," Castro says. "I could be a stripper, you know."

Sullivan laughs, and a few others on the bus laugh with him.

"Yeah, OK," Sullivan says. "My new goal for the day just became to keep your clothes on."

The exchange eases Sullivan's nerves. Sullivan is not Castro's normal guide. That'd be Lt. Col. Fred Dummar, laid up in Fort Bragg, having blown out his ACL during an airborne operation drill about six weeks ago. After Dummar got hurt, he recruited Sullivan to help Castro. Sullivan didn't hesitate. He's run ultra-100s and admires Castro greatly. But he and Castro have only been able to train three times in the past month -- one 4-mile run and two 6-milers. Not exactly ideal training to run the Boston Marathon in four hours.

On top of that, there's the pain. Castro's left knee needed reconstructive ACL surgery in 2001. His sciatic nerve still hurts from the mortar. And all the running has turned his right hip arthritic -- it grinds bone-on-bone. Add in the heat and Castro tells himself he'll be happy with a time under five hours.

After they unload in Hopkinton, Castro and Sullivan join about 50 other military personnel in a corner of the parking lot for Mass. A Catholic priest presides, wearing running shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt and lots of sunscreen. TV helicopters whop loudly above, and the priest yells at his congregants.

"You've all been through hell so this is *nothing!*" he says. "Only *one percent* of the world ever *finishes* a marathon, and you're the one percent of those, you lucky bastards, to run this one, the *Super Bowl* of Marathons. God *will* protect you. Run in His grace. Pain and fatigue and even this *heat* are all only so much *bulls---* ! Let us pray! Our Father ... "

After communion, Castro, who's already sweating, says to Sullivan, "Holy s---, it's really f----- hot out here. People are gonna drop out left and right." He grins. "But you don't worry about it. You fall out, I'll carry you. Bones." He extends his fist; Sullivan bumps it.

Castro takes another Tylenol before they head to the starting line. Castro holds a shoelace looped around his left hand; Sullivan holds the other end in his right.

A pair of spectators see them, and one says, "Oh, man, cool, they're tethered together -- they're like, never going to leave each other." Then Castro and Sullivan walk past, and the spectators see their shirts. They gawk, whisper sideways, "Holy f---, dude," one says. "You see that?"

"Yeah," the other says. "That dude is f----- blind!"

Women come up to them crying so hard they can't speak, pointing at the shirts. Soldiers hoo-rah and salute. If they react like that to a shirt, Castro thinks, maybe he should run naked. Show everyone his scars, gashing up his arms, his shoulders, across his back, with shrapnel dotting his flesh. Under his shorts and up and down his legs, it's more of the same. It's what it looks like when a body that should've died in a warzone didn't.

NOBODY KNEW who he was until they checked the dog tags. It seemed like the whole right half of Castro's face was gone. A bone stuck out of his left arm. Where parts of his body would have been -- his shoulder, his buttocks, parts of his legs, his right index finger -- there were gaping, bloody holes. When medics secured him into the chopper, Castro, incoherent but somehow alive, struggled so much that they had to strap him down and pump him with sedatives.

Three days later he was at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., just outside Washington, where many wounded soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan recuperate, and where doctors said Castro would die within a week. When his wife Evelyn walked into his room and saw his bloated body, missing half a face and pounds of flesh, she cried out to God, then collapsed.

They had met seven years earlier at the Coral Hamaca resort in the Dominican Republic. She'd flown down with her mom and aunt from New York, where she was finishing her bachelor's degree in psychology. He'd come alone, from Fort Bragg. He watched her for three days before he finally approached her at the resort club one night. The DJ was playing merengue. Ivan asked Evelyn to dance. She said no. He dramatically feigned anguish and said he was heading to the bar to drown his misery. She laughed hard. When the next song started -- something by Elvis Crespo -- she asked him to dance.

They spent the whole night together. She was gorgeous and fiery and smart, and he made her laugh and laugh. She asked him what he did, and for more than an hour he talked about the Army. He grew up in Puerto Rico and had brothers and cousins and uncles in the military, and he'd joined the Junior ROTC in high school. He attended college for four years but was still shy of a degree, and in 1990 moved to the States where he could be a real soldier full-time. He loved the sense of purpose, he explained to Evelyn. He loved the adrenaline rush the military gave him, unlike anything else.

Castro was promoted three times in four years. He went on missions to more than a dozen countries. He told her how he earned a spot in Ranger School in 1992, fighting for one of the two available positions through two days of intense, insane workouts. Day 1 was nonstop, Castro said, filled with every military exercise you can imagine. The next morning, the few left standing -- a dozen, maybe -- were told to shoulder their 65-pound rucksacks and march until they dropped. Castro marched until they gave him his spot, nearly 24 hours later.

"How?" Evelyn asked him.

"Being a soldier, you just do all you can as long as you still can," he said.

He told her about the battles he'd fought in, in the Gulf War and the Balkans, and about the Columbian military forces he'd trained in South America. He had earned countless badges, tabs, honors. When he led, his men loved it. Evelyn later joked with Ivan that it was like he was a cell phone stuck on "send" that night. On and on about the Army.

Evelyn asked him why he'd come to the Dominican alone. He said his mom had just died back home in Puerto Rico.

"What?" she replied. "Should you be here if your mom just died?"

"Well, my mom never likes to see me sad."

When they left the Dominican, Castro returned to Fort Bragg and Evelyn to New York. For a year their love bloomed, and they made the distance work. He would become a Green Beret in 2000, ultimately joining Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 781 -- an A-Team. In December that year, without telling her, he brought a U-Haul to New York. While she finished her last class, he packed up her stuff, and when she walked out of the building, he was there waiting with the truck. She didn't even walk the stage to get her diploma. On New Year's Day 2001, she moved with him to North Carolina. In June that year, they married.

Five years later, at the hospital in Bethesda, Evelyn fought for Castro like the best of soldiers. She refused the doctors who wanted her to sign donor release forms should Castro die in one of his nearly dozen emergency surgeries. "That's not an option you're allowed to have while you work on him," she told them. She dragged priests and Fransiscan monks into his room. She hung pictures of him everywhere -- for the doctors, she said, to show them they fought for a real person, not an exploded, comatose mess.

Two months after doctors said he'd die, Castro woke up. He'd lost virtually all ability to move. The first thing he asked Evelyn was for something to spit in, and then, "Porras and Dreese?"

"They died, baby." He wished he hadn't woken up: A good lieutenant keeps his guys safe.

In the days to come he asked for more and more morphine. The drug deadened his pain, but it couldn't stop the phantom visions. One day, Evelyn walked in, and he said he saw her, his surviving eye's sight restored. He shouted, and she ran to his side, crying, both of them ecstatic. But then his eye didn't follow her from the door.

"Are you sure?" she said. "Are you sure you see me?"

"Yes!" His eye darted in her direction. He saw her form-fitting black long-sleeved T-shirt and white capris. He saw the brown hair falling over her shoulders. "You are so beautiful." But instead of hair his hand hit air, and Evelyn told him she wore jeans and a pink tank top.

"Just turn on the lights," he'd say.

"Baby, the lights are already on."

When the doctors told him the blindness was irreversible, he felt a rage and despair that made him feel like his head would explode.

Castro began therapy a week after waking up, and he only halfheartedly endured the rehab sessions with a 6-foot-tall girl he called "Katie the Physical Terrorist." The first time she asked him to stand, he couldn't. He could barely lift a one-pound dumbbell.

Evelyn tried to focus him on the positives. Obliterated as his body was, his brain was OK -- remarkable considering that traumatic brain injury, or TBI, has become the trademark of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and that thousands of soldiers sent to Walter Reed had to battle it. But in a way Castro wished he'd not been spared, because an intact brain meant the other thing

he could actually see was exactly how much his life had been ruined. He'd ask, "What kind of man can I even be?"

IT'S SO HOT in Boston today that race officials allow runners to defer a year. About 2,000 who registered don't start. Another 2,000 will need medical attention. Medical tents will overflow with passed-out runners on cots outside. More than 150 will be taken by ambulance to hospitals. And by Mile 6, Castro's legs burn like he's run 20. Four miles later, the lack of training and the heat leave Castro wobbling, and he's gone from wanting to finish in under five hours to just wanting to finish.

He's quit just one marathon in his life. It was about a year ago. Some idiot cut him off and stopped dead for water, and Castro crashed into him. Just brutalized that arthritic hip. He dropped out halfway through and regretted it immediately. The hip hurt, but quitting killed.

At Mile 10, he says to Sullivan, quietly, "If I'm going to finish this, we gotta play it smart."

WHEN EVELYN walked the halls with Castro, as part of his rehab, she noticed other soldiers, stricken with TBI, sitting beside their wives and kids, fully awake but hopelessly unaware.

"I'm so glad you still know me," she said. Something about that helped him see how important it was that he was still here, physically and mentally. He could recognize the plights of others, those just like him or even worse off. It suggested, maybe, a new direction for his life.

That sense was deepened after a visit from a Marine veteran named Mike Jernigan. He had lost his eyes in 2004 to a bomb in Iraq, and he stopped by Castro's room about two months into his stay at the hospital. Jernigan told Castro that after his injury he thought his life had ended,

too. In addition to his eyes, Jernigan had lost most use of his right hand, a great deal of his face, and -- in time -- his wife, his childhood sweetheart. But Jernigan was healing. He traveled, raising money for guide dog associations, giving motivational speeches. Now, he showed Castro how to walk with a cane, and he answered any questions Castro had about life after blindness, primarily that big one, about what kind of a man he could be.

Castro's body had been on the mend, but it wasn't until then, seeing that even in the darkness Jernigan had found a good life, that Castro's soul began catching up. That should be me. A few days later, Castro overheard a nurse and doctor talking about the Marine Corps Marathon they'd just run in D.C. He decided to run it the next year; it seemed like the sort of outlandish goal that could show others that as brutal as his wounds were, his life would be his own for as long as he lived.

His room became a tiny gym, weights piled in corners and resistance bands strung from bed rails and walls. His time with Katie the Physical Terrorist became only a third of his workload. He felt his way around cardio machines. Evelyn and her mother guided him through weights.

After he was discharged from the hospital in early December, nearly three months after the mortar attack, his wife and her mother drove him to the gym near their home in North Carolina. Evelyn quit her job as a speech-language pathologist to help him. Until he was finished with recovery, the Army couldn't discharge him, so they got by on his military paycheck. She handled his appointments, laundry, cooking. She bathed him. When bits of shrapnel came to the surface, she squeezed them out for him. The couple kept them in a glass jar. She chauffeured him to the gym and, later, races. At first he couldn't figure out how to run. Ellipticals and bikes were stationary, but running, even on a treadmill -- he had no feel. He fell often. Finally, a friend he

made while at a Veteran's Administration blind rehab facility in Virginia suggested he and a guide use a shoelace. Back in North Carolina, shoelace in hand, Castro started running with some buddies at a Fort Bragg track. They started with 800-meter runs.

In a month or so, 800 meters became a mile, and a mile became two or three, and from there it was just a matter of conditioning and pace, same as anyone. Sometimes he'd fall and twist an ankle or bang a knee, and his friends would ask if he was good to keep going. He'd laugh.

"Man, if pain could stop me, I'd already be dead."

He had had more than 40 surgeries. Some days everything hurt, and yeah, he wanted to quit. But then he'd think about Dreese and Porras. He became relentless, and Evelyn worried. She'd suggest he take a day off. He'd argue, "I can't. If I'm going to come all the way back, and stay back, I can't f----- back down." Training had become what morphine had once been. In the gym and on the road, all the stress and anxiety he felt about his new life sweated itself out. "It was like my fix," he says.

Castro ran the 2007 Marine Corps Marathon, almost a year after the mortar attack. Three people ran with him. Unable to keep pace, one fell out at 10 miles. The other at 20. Castro finished in 4:14.

Seeing what he could do, he wanted to do more. He ran more marathons, rode long bike rides ranging as far as 400 miles, even did some triathlons. (He'd swim tethered to someone leading him; he'd bike on a custom-made Cannondale tandem.) The Army also decided not to discharge him, instead making him an executive officer with the HHC 7th Special Forces group at Fort Bragg. Out of combat but involved in most everything leading up to it, Castro became the only known blind active duty Special Forces officer in Army history.

Evelyn couldn't deny it -- for awhile, she found it all rather exciting. She felt like she was on one of his missions with him, for the first time ever. He called her his pit bull and a workhorse. She tried her best to love and to endure, and she figured that after a year or two, he'd have it all out of his system. Then they could settle into a new life, maybe have a baby.

But that didn't happen. Something was starting to erode between them.

AROUND MILE 13, Castro pops 500 more milligrams of Tylenol and about as much Advil. He and Sullivan walk hills, keep steady pace on downhills and flats. They hit every water stop. Every time someone is spraying runners with a hose, they soak. They run part of the race with their shoes full of water.

Disaster nearly strikes at Mile 18, where earlier in the day last year's winner succumbed to the heat. A pack swerves in front of Castro, stops dead for water. No time to pull the tether and explain -- Sullivan grabs Castro's hand, yanks him aside.

"I really feel something there," Castro jokes, "when you hold my hand like that."

A couple of miles later, a runner collapses from exhaustion, and Sullivan does it again.

"Still feel it?" he asks.

"No, I lost it."

A few moments later, looking to pass the time, Castro starts singing, "She Lost That Lovin' Feeling." Sullivan laughs and before he knows it, finds himself singing along. They belt it out, and for a while the heat doesn't seem so bad.

IN 2008, Castro met 20-year-old Joel Tavera. Five rockets had blown up Tavera's Humvee in Iraq, and he was one of two survivors. He had third-degree burns all over his body, went blind,

lost part of a leg, and his hands quit working right. The Navy contacted Castro, and he flew with Evelyn to San Antonio, where Tavera was in intensive care. He was missing part of his skull -- removed by doctors because his brain was swelling -- and most of his skin. Castro couldn't shake Tavera's hand; what was left of it would have fallen off. Castro, of course, couldn't see him, but Evelyn could. That she didn't say anything upon meeting him told Castro everything he needed to know.

"It was devastating," Castro would later say. "At least when I lost my sight, I was already 39 -- I had lived a life. This kid had not lived his life. So he'd just given up on his life."

Tavera grew addicted to painkillers after his release and gained 50 pounds. He had to undergo countless more surgeries and Castro would visit him at the hospital, offering encouragement. Castro flew to Tavera's home in Florida to talk with him, too. Soon they were speaking on the phone almost every day, and the message from Castro was the same: You can still lead your own life.

The message ultimately broke through. In 2010, Tavera ran a 5K. Last year, he ran three.

"Just knowing what he'd been through," says Tavera, "and seeing that he could do all these crazy things he's doing, after all that -- it showed me that maybe I need to not let my condition get me down so much, too. It sucks sometimes. But then I talk to him, and I just think about what he's been through, and I feel like yeah, I can keep going. At least for another day."

Tavera was not the first guy Castro met with -- and he wouldn't be the last. There are dozens of wounded veterans whom Castro has mentored. And thousands more who've heard him speak. Castro began seeing these visits and those speaking engagements as his destiny. A soldier to the core, his new life served the same purpose he'd always lived for: To fight for the good of

the world. Thousands of soldiers come home broken by war, and they face their own dark painful nights, their own horrific battles. To Castro, they were now all his guys.

He gets them laughing with jokes about, say, his nose. "God takes a rib out of Adam and gives him Eve. All I got was a nose?" He tells them about Walter Reed, where, as he puts it, "I should've died. I was seen by every damn clinic there, minus OBGYN and labor delivery." He shows his scars. He has people run their fingers over the shrapnel embedded in his skin, and tap his cheek, which was rebuilt entirely from plastic. He listens to their stories, and he tells his.

"Ivan has made me feel like, with as serious of injuries as he's had, that anything can be possible," says Sgt. Ken Katter, who suffered neck, back and brain damage in Iraq after an improvised explosive device detonated beside him in 2007. He also finished a 5K in 2009, after meeting Castro. "I might not be able to do some of the things he can because of my injuries, but I can do something. And doing something, anything, is better than doing nothing."

Castro soon spent half the year traveling. The training, the running, the speaking -- it became his life, and Evelyn's. This was no passing fad, as she had hoped. One year, he ran a marathon on her birthday. It rang more and more hollow, a blind man calling her beautiful. They didn't laugh together like they used to. The pit bull and workhorse jokes grew stale, then bitter.

She stopped traveling with him, letting him go alone with Dummar or whoever else would take him. Even without her, he kept going. In exasperation she'd ask, "Why do you KEEP DOING THIS, Ivan?"

His response was almost always the same: "Because I still can. Because people need to see what's possible."

They took a trip together in 2009, to the Grotto of Bernadette in Lourdes, France. Roman Catholic legend holds that its water heals all wounds. But not theirs. They talked and they fought

and they cried. Ultimately, he told her that if she truly believed she deserved a different life with a different man, then she could go. The summer after the grotto, she left him.

AROUND MILE 23, Castro is struggling, and in a delirious reach for motivation, he starts singing the national anthem. Sullivan joins him, and then nearby runners do too. Everyone gets loud, and spectators join in, and as Castro runs, the song carries with him up the street. Even in the heat, he gets goose bumps.

IN 2010, divorced and in search of restoration, Castro cycled 400 miles across Europe with a big group. He and some other wounded veterans hung wreaths in Holland at the site of World War II's Operation Market Garden, at its time the largest airborne operation in history. Along the way, he met another cyclist named Amber.

She was an American, too, athletic, with fair skin, long brown hair and lovely blue eyes. Romance blossomed, then grew back in the States, where she worked in a confidential capacity for the federal government. "I've just had more adventures and have more fun with Ivan than ever with anybody else," she says. "And how can you not be inspired by him?"

In January 2011, Ivan and Amber ran the Disney Marathon together. That May, she accompanied him to Hawaii's North Shore Marathon, but didn't compete: She was pregnant. When she met him at the finish line, Ivan dropped to a knee and pulled out a ring. They were married a few weeks later in Maui, and she moved to North Carolina. That September -- just a few weeks after the attack's anniversary -- their daughter was born.

Soon after, he resumed his brutal schedule. Amber didn't question it: "When he goes and runs these marathons and gives these speeches -- I've seen people's faces, and how they're touched by him. I couldn't imagine saying, 'Don't do that.'"

Still, he was away for days or weeks at a time. "He keeps saying he's going to slow down," Amber says, "but I doubt that's going to happen."

THE LAST QUARTER MILE is easiest. The endorphins flood Castro's brain. A few minutes ago, he'd made sure to wipe the sweat and snot from his face, and now he makes sure to run with his head up, chest out. "It's all about the cameras now," he jokes to Sullivan. Beside him, Sullivan smiles. They run toward the finish, floating on the screams of thousands lining the sidewalk. With a few hundred meters left, Castro tells Sullivan, "Thank you."

They cross the finish line with a time of 5:44.

Amber is not there to greet him; she's home with their daughter in North Carolina. In two weeks, Castro will be away again, this time in Colorado Springs for the 2012 Warrior Games, a six-day competition for wounded soldiers and veterans. The month after he'll fly to San Francisco and spend two months riding a bicycle across the country. After that he's scheduled to run five more marathons before the new year, including the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington on Oct. 28. And in 2013, there's a 100-mile ultra he wants to do. In between, of course, are the dozens if not hundreds of soldiers to encourage.

It's a grind, and tonight, in Boston, he's starting to feel it. After finishing the marathon, he joined the veterans and police who were part of his convoy for dinner and drinks at a bar overlooking the Boston Harbor. Now, as he lies in yet another forgettable hotel room, he can't fall asleep. Although he's taken 200 milligrams of doctor-prescribed Celebrex, his knee, his hip,

his heart -- they all still hurt. Lying in bed, aching in the dark, he wonders if it's still worth it.

"Honestly, this is getting stupid," he says. "I'm killing my body. I'm running slower than ever."

Maybe it's the beers, or his exhaustion, but he is more frank than usual, more discerning.

"I'm always away from people I love," he says. "It takes such a toll on them."

Then he hears it -- that question: Why do you keep doing this, Ivan? He stiffens slightly, growing more resolute, as if he has decided something.

"I will never quit," he says. "They're more than just words on a shirt."

Castro says one more thing before sleep finally comes. For the first time all day his voice is heavy, even solemn.

"That's just what a good soldier does. That's just what war is. You just hope everyone else will understand."

MAD FOR CAROLINA

It's a fine line, the difference between passionate fan and scary insane person. When you first meet Greg Cauley, you're not sure which one you're getting. Especially when the guy tells you he cares about the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Tar Heels so much he considers the school's teams his betrothed.

Greg Cauley is 58 years old and he's been to every Carolina home football game since 1974. He's been to every home basketball game since 1985. During that football streak, he's only missed one road game, and that was because the Tar Heels football team played in Maryland at the same time as the basketball team played a home game. He's traveled to 30 states to see the Tar Heels play. He has the ticket stubs to prove it, stuffed into an overflowing Saucony shoebox. He has a banner signed by every single Tar Heel basketball player and coach since 1975. Dean Smith. Michael Jordan. Tyler Hansbrough. They're all there. He's recorded every game on TV since 1982. The Carolina basketball powers-that-be know him so well that in February, for his 500th basketball game in the Smith Center, against Virginia, the ushers delivered a custom-made "500" cookie cake right to his seat. In his backyard stands a 3/4th-scale replica of the Old Well on UNC's campus.

But Cauley's not who you might expect. A First Citizens Bank branch manager, he doesn't even live in Chapel Hill, but rather, five miles outside a tiny town called Kinston, down a country highway called Vine Swamp Road. A humble one-story house sits on two acres. What looks like an endless strip of farmland borders his property to the north, and to the east two dozen cattle graze. A neighbor two houses down lives in an actual log cabin. All this, more than two hours from Tobacco Road.

"I just don't know how he does it," says Tommy Howard, one of Cauley's oldest friends. "It's just so way over the top, over and beyond. I know most of us sports fans are a little crazy, but Greg is just...he's Greg."

I meet Cauley in Kinston last Thursday. A sky-blue flag bearing the NC logo flies on a fifty-foot pole in his front yard beside an American flag and the state flag of North Carolina. There's another one in the backyard, and on top of the pole is a cast-iron Ramses weathervane. There's also a Winged Victory sculpture in the corner of the yard near the road, facing the Old Well. Behind the well is another sculpture, St. Michael Slaying the Devil.

"I try not to go so far as to say that's about Carolina-Duke," Cauley says, then grins. "But that is a devil."

In the driveway sits Cauley's new car, a white 2012 Ford Taurus SHO EcoBoost edition that he got in August. He's already put 12,000 miles on it. It's covered in at least twenty magnets, most which he handmade, ready for tomorrow's drive to Greensboro for Carolina's first games in the NCAA tournament. A two-foot Ramses ram logo is affixed to the hood. On the dashboard rides Wax Ramses, a little ram-shaped candle Cauley got in 1972 that's ridden on his dash to every game.

Oh, and Cauley names his cars after space shuttles. This one: *Atlantis*.

"Why?" I ask.

He laughs. "Why do I do anything that I do?"

"You tell me."

"Oh, I don't know," he says. "Just because it's fun. That's what you're supposed to do, right? You're supposed to do what suits your passion. You're supposed to do what you care about."

Cauley cares so much even some Carolina fans have turned on him. But that's just...he's Greg.

WHEN CAULEY BUILT the Well replica in 2003, he hosted an unveiling barbecue—Carolina fans only—that turned out more than 100 people. He dedicated the structure to his parents, Rena and Jim. He got a plaque and everything. The barbecue has since become an annual tradition, now drawing more than 150 visitors from states away. "You could say I have an extended Carolina family," he says.

The Well replica attracted the local media, which then attracted the trolls. Cauley was accosted online and sometimes even by phone—always anonymously. He was called a momma's boy, an attention whore, a freak, a weirdo. Cauley's response was, as usual, a headshake of disbelief and a laugh.

"I'd never tarnish all this by doing it for attention," he says.

The day I called him to start researching this piece, he thought he was getting pranked. It's happened before. On the surface, he's an easy target. The house is the same one he's lived in since high school. He's not married. Has no children. Lives with his mother.

"You could probably say I'm married to Carolina," he says. "That's just what I've planned my life around. I never considered trying to find anybody who would let me do this."

As for the insults, Cauley shrugs them off, too. "They just don't know what they're talking about."

IT STARTED WHEN he was a kid. His parents and sisters were all Carolina fans, they'd watch every game together on television. Cauley wanted to go to the local high schools' basketball

games but his parents wouldn't take him. Not until he was 10, when his dad, Jim, began teaching carpentry at South Lenoir High School. Dad took him to a game. Big game. Packed gym. In childlike wonder, Cauley lost himself, thinking the simplest thought over and over: Dude, it's a basketball game. His dad's cheers, the game, the electricity crackling through the crowd—like so many kids, it got Cauley high.

In a few years he made the freshman team but soon realized he was terrible, so to stay around the game he kept stats. While Cauley was in high school his father literally built their house with his own two hands. Cauley and his two sisters helped. It took a long time. To this day, the house still stands strong. For college, Cauley enrolled at UNC-Chapel Hill, where he attended every game possible. When he graduated in 1976 he got into banking. He worked in Clinton, N.C. for a few years, then took a job back home in Kinston. He only grew more obsessed with Carolina sports. All of them. He went to baseball games, lacrosse games, soccer games. "If they had a tiddlywinks team," he says, "I'd go watch that, too."

That house he built with his father is the one he lives in now with Rena. Today, Cauley owns it and has no plans to leave. He likes that he helped build it.

"He's got a pretty fierce loyal streak in him," his mom says.

And that explains much of why Cauley lives where he does. He became the man of the family in 1986. That's when Dad died of brain cancer. With his sisters married and moved away, Cauley took it on himself to tend to his mother.

"If it weren't for Greg," Rena says, "I don't know what would've happened to me."

"Your parents, they enable you to be what you are and do what you do and, you know, live," Cauley says. "I got a good life here. I have a great job going, I like the people and I like the area. It just suits me. So I figure, least I can do is stick around and take care of Mom."

One thing about his dad's funeral: they originally planned it for one time, before realizing it conflicted with a Carolina-Maryland home game. They rescheduled. Carolina's basketball office sent flowers and gave Cauley extra tickets to the next game. After the funeral, Cauley took his mom along with his sisters and their husbands.

CAULEY USED TO take Rena with him a lot more than he does now. She doesn't like to travel as much as she used to, and diehard sports fans are getting obscene anyhow. Some diehards are obsessed in a way that makes sports better, like Clipper Darrell, the Los Angeles Clippers superfan who dances with cheerleaders, or the late Freddy Schuman, better known as "Freddy Sez" who rallied New York Yankees fans with homemade signs and by banging a frying pan.

Then there are the lunatics. Alabama football fan Harvey Updyke was charged with poisoning the iconic Toomer's Corner oak trees, a huge piece of Auburn tradition. Following a baseball game last spring, some Los Angeles Dodgers fans beat San Francisco Giants fan Brian Stow into a coma.

While Cauley has neither witnessed nor experienced anything that awful, he has been cussed out, spit on, and threatened. He's returned to his car to find it vandalized, opposing teams' names scratched into the paint or nails positioned just so that if he were to roll forward or backward he'd pop a tire. The way some people act baffles Cauley. He vividly remembers the last time he spoke to someone the way he hears most sports fans speak today. He was in high school. He felt that his team got robbed by some bad calls, and in a moment of rage he called the referees words he made me swear I wouldn't write here—a less polite rendition of, "My heavens, you're extremely below average, you gentlemen who sleep with women who get paid for such things!"

"It just came out of nowhere," he says. "I felt like I should go wash my own mouth out with soap. I'd just lost perspective. There's never any reason to speak to someone like that. There's no reason to ever disrespect someone like that."

He worries that American sports fans may one day become like those in Europe, like soccer fans who riot or basketball fans who throw so much junk at players that teams have to install cages around the court.

"It's just the disintegration of a society when you see that," he says. "Human beings don't act like that. That's people becoming more like wild animals. They get so passionate they lose perspective. People forget—this is just entertainment. I love this stuff, and I know some things I do are pretty out there, but some people just take it way too far. I'm like, 'Dude, it's a basketball game.'"

WHATEVER ABUSE HE takes, the games provide his fix. "It got to where I didn't feel right missing a game," Cauley says. "And now it's gotten to where I just can't fathom it. That doesn't even seem like a real thing that could happen."

Whether football or basketball, Cauley always wears his headset. He claps really loud and he yells a lot, too. It is to him what a workout or sex is to others, de-stressing, clearing his mind.

Cauley plans work around the fix, getting ahead and coordinating so that for 7 p.m. games he can leave around 1 or 2 p.m. "I'd rather sit in the gym for an hour than sit in traffic for an hour," he says. When games start at 9 p.m., he doesn't have to leave work early, but that means he gets home around 3 or 4 the next morning, giving just enough time for a nap before

rising for work at 6:30 and hitting Bojangles—a Southern-style fast food chain enormously popular in North Carolina—for breakfast.

The cost is substantial. He's jilted friends by telling them if they want him to make it to a wedding or funeral to make sure it's not during a game. Football season tickets are \$315 a year. Basketball, \$650. Rams club dues, to stay eligible for season tickets, are an additional \$1,000. Between cheap fast food, a tank of gas, food and drink at the games, a game day's total cost including the ticket runs \$200. There were seven home football games and 18 home basketball games. That alone amounts to approximately \$5,000 a year, not including postseason trips to bowl games—not that Carolina needs to worry about that next season—and NCAA tournament games. The drive from Kinston to Chapel Hill and back is no easy highway shot, demanding a trip through speed trap-riddled Raleigh. But Cauley keeps getting in the car. Lots of people don't understand Cauley. He doesn't understand them either.

"I see people at these games that don't make sense," he says. "Like, ladies that just go with their husbands and bring a book and sit down and read the whole time. Or balance a checkbook. I'm like, 'What are you *doing?*'"

Every road game he can't attend, Cauley watches on TV. Contrary to his at-the-game persona, at home he's no more nuts than you or me, but still totally just...Greg. During the telecast, his legs must always be crossed. The top leg must be crossed in the direction of Carolina's basket. He always has a Carolina mug full of sweet tea, and the Tar Heels logo must always face the TV screen. The game is always on Record.

The 16-by-12-foot room, a converted car port, overflows with memorabilia, things like a 1929 football program (the biggest players were 200 pounds), old UNC yearbooks, all those

VHS tapes and DVDs, even a 4-by-8-foot rectangle of basketball court from Carolina's old Carmichael Gym.

As for the television, it's one of those bulky, boxy things, a 1995 RCA 52-inch monster.

"I'll keep it 'til it dies," he says proudly.

LIKE ANY GOOD disciple, Cauley shares the faith. He's become a regional redistributor, taking the tickets his season-ticket-holding section buddies won't be using and finding homes for them. He never resells for profit. "It's not about *money*," he says. "Nobody should make it about the money. If you're going to sell it, fine. Just sell it at face value and give someone a chance to see a game who might not otherwise get to. I just want someone who maybe couldn't have a chance to experience a Carolina game to get that opportunity."

One time, he sold a ticket to an acquaintance who turned around and sold it for \$400.

"I wasn't ugly to him or anything," Cauley says, "but he'll never get another ticket from me."

Cauley even turned down a youth minister. The minister asked for tickets, Cauley said sure, minister said thanks, his buddy's a huge State fan and has long wanted to see State play Carolina in the Dean Dome. Cauley promptly rescinded the offer. "Keep it in the family," he told him.

The minister didn't much care for that.

So sometimes when he's denying people tickets, or refusing to invite non-Carolina fans to his cookouts, Greg Cauley rubs people the wrong way. "His thought is, 'Why let someone in our house who's supporting the other guys?'" says Howard. "Some people really don't like that, but he's fair about it. And you know, the truth is, he's one of the nicest guys you could meet."

Kay Thomas, who worked as the Carolina basketball offices secretary for 32 years and proved instrumental in helping Cauley secure all those signatures on that banner year after year, says he was "like a breath of fresh air every year." She gets drowned in autograph requests. Some fans are pushy. Some call everyday to check on their stuff. Cauley was always the opposite, she says, so gracious that Thomas would call him if it took her longer than she expected. He never complained.

Cauley missed the first half of Carolina's loss at Florida State this season because he had to attend a friend's brother's funeral. Considering that's the first time he's missed that much of a game in four decades and that his beloved Heels played so terribly, that'll probably be the last minute he ever misses. He's had friends and family reschedule weddings just so he can be there. He's lost friends, sure, but he's made plenty more.

A longtime friend named Brian Smith's uncle died a few months ago. Cauley and his mother went to the funeral. Brian, who is 35 and has known the Cauleys since he was in kindergarten, got to talking with Rena about the next day's Carolina-Duke showdown in Chapel Hill. Brian mentioned in passing, "Oh, man, that's on my bucket list, to see a Carolina-Duke game in the Smith Center."

When Cauley got home, he changed into his sweats and a T-shirt, then checked his messages. He had a voicemail from a friend who had an extra ticket. Cauley called her back, told her he'd take it. Then he put his suit back on and went back to the church and found Brian. Brian loved every second. Except for the part where Duke's Austin Rivers hit that three at the buzzer to win.

SAME AS HE didn't build the Old Well for attention, Cauley's streaks really aren't about The Streak. He couldn't build his life around a statistic.

"At some point, early on, I reached this understanding, I guess," he says. "You only have so many games you'll be able to attend. There's a finite number in your lifetime you can go to. And this is something I just really enjoy and I want to make sure I don't miss any opportunities. I'm not going to keep any kind of streaks alive. I'm going, really, just for the excitement. For that high."

And that's enough to make up for not having a wife or kids?

"It just never interested me all that much," he says.

There's never even been one girl. "I was a geek in high school," he says. "Big Star Trek fan. And then once I got into this routine later in life, I just had no interest in trying to find someone who might mess it up. Besides, it gets way more expensive, bringing other people to these games all the time."

As obsessed as he gets, when Cauley gets a chance to meet one of the Carolina players or coaches he remains remarkably even. A couple months ago he happened to be on the Dean Dome court, getting his picture taken for a travel magazine article, and at the end of the shoot, the players came out for practice, including Kinston native Reggie Bullock. Cauley watched for a minute, taking Bullock in up close, in what he describes as "the gladiators' arena," but then he left. "Didn't want to interrupt them," he says.

He's met Dean Smith, Phil Ford, Eric Montross, and others at Rams Club meetings and basketball banquets and such. He's shook their hand, talked for a few minutes, told them thank you. And that's it.

Then we talk about Brian Smith, and then I feel bad for making Cauley relive that Rivers shot—otherwise known as The Unfortunate Incident—so I suggest he put in his DVD of the Carolina-Duke game at Cameron. It takes him ten seconds to find it, third DVD from the top of a stack of about 50.

"Oh yeah," he says, smiling as Carolina goes up 20-5. "This is good."

...

Before I leave, Cauley urges me to try some banana pudding—Rena's just made it. I ask him what he thinks it'll take to end the streak. He doesn't hesitate. "I don't think the streak will die until I do. I just can't imagine missing a game."

Cauley talks about the high, but there's got to be more to this kind of devotion. Right?

Cauley just shakes his head. "I really don't know," he says. "I've been thinking about that because you keep asking, and I guess I'd have to get on a couch with a therapist or something to figure it out. But then they'd probably get into stuff like whether I hate my parents, or try to find something I was deprived of as a child, or maybe connect it to losing something at some point. But it's nothing like that. I've always had everything I needed. It's just my thing. So I guess that's the best explanation I can give you—that it's inexplicable."

OVER THE WEEKEND, some non-Carolina fans started mocking Cauley in Greensboro when he began protesting calls during Sunday's NCAA tournament game against Creighton. He saw some Carolina fans looking at him sideways and laughing. He doesn't care. Not even on the rare occasions that one of Carolina's own—one of his own family—turns on him. He recalls one game where, as always, he had his headset on as he stood on his feet clapping and hollering, far

gone into his escape, he felt something hard hit him in the back. Then again in the shoulder. Then his head. Ice cubes from a concession stand soda.

He turned, saw a well-dressed gentleman giving him the stink eye and yelling.

"What?" Cauley asked, pulling a headphone away from his ear.

"Your clapping!" the gentleman yelled. "It's too loud! You're driving me crazy!"

Cauley didn't fire back with a "Don't you know I've been coming here for three decades?" or call for an usher or even so much as raise his voice. He shot the guy a glare and smirked and shook his head. As he tugged his headset back on, he just said one thing.

"Dude, it's a *basketball game!*"

NOBODY WALKS ALONE

TWO HOURS BEFORE MIDNIGHT on Nov. 28, 2009, Michael Williams rises from his chair at Club 426, a Caribbean nightclub outside Atlanta. The bouncer wears a black shirt, black jeans, black shoes. A co-worker opens the door and lets in the first wave of people. The deejay steps into his booth. Williams crosses himself and prays, "The blood of Christ cover me. Dear Lord, don't let me die by the hands of some punk with a gun."

Williams is one of the lucky ones who made it out of Roseland, the violent, destitute neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. Though he looks like a former football player -- he stands 6'9", 300 pounds -- basketball had been his game. He dominated the post in college, played a little in the NBA, had a good career in Europe. Nickname: Massive Mike. Now 46, he's spent the past decade working security, mostly as a bodyguard for stars such as Snoop Dogg and Beyonce.

Around 2 a.m., with an hour of work left, Williams rotates toward the speakers near the door. The club is packed with people singing, sweating, gyrating. Reggae music plays at full blast. Williams adjusts his earplugs. Then he notices two men shouting near the entrance. They start shoving each other. One throws his beer bottle, which shatters on the floor. Williams moves in. Stupid stuff like this is why he is tired of his job; this is why tonight will be his last shift ever as a bouncer. He steps between the men and places his right hand on the shoulder of the one nearest the exit.

The next thing he hears is a boom. He recognizes the sound immediately. Williams hits the floor and rolls, trying to get away from the two men. He reaches up and touches his left jaw.

It has a hole in it. He shot me. He shot me in the face. He doesn't realize he's also been shot twice in the shoulder and once in the shoulder blade.

The shooter isn't finished. Bullets five and six hit Williams' ribs and hip. He doesn't feel them. Number seven blasts into his back. He feels that one, and his legs go stiff. Oh, s--. Bullet eight follows in his spine. Then it's over. The attack takes less than 10 seconds.

Lying on the ground in shock and disbelief, Williams touches the hole in his jaw again. He hears screams and the rush of footsteps around him. As the blood floods from his body, he asks God to forgive his sins. Thanks him for the chance to do so before he dies. He's not afraid. He's at peace.

Then he sees a broken bottle and feels the spilled beer on his face. Williams lifts his head and looks through the open door filled with fleeing people. I'll die outside, but I'm not dying in here. He roars and shoves himself up on his elbows. He tries to crawl. He can't move.

AS THE TV IN HIS MOTHER'S LIVING ROOM flickers before him, the big man in the wheelchair wonders whether there are fates worse than death.

It is June 2010. The shooting had placed Williams in a coma for two months. He lost a kidney, part of his liver, part of his jaw. He lost, worst of all, the use of his legs. Of the two bullets that lodged in his back, one sliced through his spine's L2 vertebrae, just below his abdomen; the other, between the S1 and S2, near the pelvis. Williams is paralyzed from the waist down.

Shortly after his release from the hospital in February, he moved in with his mother; the 69-year-old Dorothy is the only person who can care for him. There is indignity in living here, his childhood home, a small pink house on the corner of 113th and Wallace in Roseland. But

that's not the greatest indignity. Williams wears diapers, and his mother has to change him. She must remove his feces from his rectum by gloved hand. Dorothy tells him it's okay, she doesn't mind. He doesn't believe her. He often breaks down crying. He wishes God had just let him die.

That thought first crossed his mind soon after he woke from his coma. He had been dreaming about water, and he was so thirsty he tried to drink straight from his IV bag. A nurse gave him a cup of water instead, and it was the best he'd ever had. But then, looking at his lifeless legs, it all hit him: He'd awoken to his old world a new creature with problems that would get an animal euthanized. He was furious.

Now, seven months after his shooting, he can't let go of his rage. He hates leaving his mom's house, even just for dinner. It's a job and a half, packing his wheelchair and his massive self into an SUV, and the stares that follow make him feel like a freak show. But there's little comfort at home either. He's consumed by the fact that the man who did this to him remains free. Williams has this fantasy about what he'd do if he were ever across a courtroom from him. His huge hands would clasp like iron around the shooter's throat, and he'd watch as his breathing stopped.

Williams has no other fantasies. There is nothing he wants to do. There is nowhere he wants to go. So today, like every day, he plans to watch TV in his mother's living room. ESPN. Soaps. ESPN. Back and forth. Killing time.

Amazing thing, though: Flipping on ABC, he happens to catch a teaser for the 6 p.m. local news. It promises the story of 28-year-old Haitian earthquake survivor Bazelais Suy, who spent months rehabbing his paralyzed body in Chicago. Williams doesn't change the channel for the next two hours, waiting for the segment to come on. When it does, it shows Suy walking down a hallway using canes, wearing a red shirt and the biggest smile. Behind him is his doctor,

who looks nothing like one. He's seven feet tall. He wears motorcycle boots, jeans, a vest and a cowboy hat -- all black. Then his name appears on the screen. Dan Ivankovich.

Williams shouts. That name. He knows that name. It has to be the same guy -- his old teammate from high school, what, 30 years ago?

That night, Williams gets the doctor's e-mail address from the TV station and sends him a message: "Saw your interview. Maybe you could help me. I was hoping you could help me. We've got something in common. We played together."

The next morning, Williams' phone rings. He picks up and hears, "Hey, this is Dan Ivankovich."

"Big Dan. What's up, brother? It's Mike Williams."

"Massive Mike?" Ivankovich says, chuckling. "What are you up to, you big, black son of a bitch?"

Williams laughs, and the doctor laughs with him, and just like that, the three decades between teammates is gone. But as much as he wants to play it cool, Williams fights tears to talk. "I gotta get up, man," he says. "Something happened to me." He tells Ivankovich what he can remember from the club. He tells him the pain is too much. He tells him, "I'm sorry, I don't want to beg, I know you're busy -- but you gotta help me. If you can, you please gotta help me."

"I'm sure I can," Ivankovich says.

"You can get me walking again?"

"No guarantees. It's going to be hard as hell. But dude, I'll do all I can."

THEY FIRST MET on the rooftop of the Chicago Sun-Times building, eye level with the city skyline, the world at their feet. It was the winter of 1980. Williams was a senior forward at De La

Salle Institute. Ivankovich, a 6'11" center, was in his last year at Glenbrook South, the state-title favorite. They were two of the 10 players who had been selected to play on the Sun-Times' all-area travel team, and they were there to get their pictures taken.

Ivankovich immediately stood out to Williams because he was the only white player and the only one from the suburbs. Most of the city kids loathed his kind. When they first shook hands, Williams himself thought, This white boy's crazy. Something about his eyes, wide and wild and blue. But Mike believed in judging nobody. And as they talked on the rooftop, they bonded over a respect for each other's talent and their shared passion for pranking teammates. Itching powder. Water balloons. Icy Hot in jockstraps.

They were, to be sure, from different worlds. Ivankovich grew up the son of a military doctor. Williams grew up fatherless and the only man in a house with his mother, grandmother and five sisters. Despite the gulf between them, they became like brothers the next spring while playing together on the all-area team after their high school seasons. It went deeper than the jokes; it went beyond the game, scholarship offers and stories of Bobby Knight visiting their living rooms. Talking together after practices and during road trips to various tournaments, they'd agonize over life's grand injustices, the violence and depravation that had taken hold of areas like Roseland. "Someone's gotta do something about this, man," Williams would tell his teammate.

Ivankovich would nod, as earnest teenagers do.

"I mean, really, why are these kids starving?" he'd ask. "Why are 3-year-olds dying by gunfire?" They each vowed to one day return to Chicago as bigger men who could make a difference.

Then Ivankovich blew out his knee at a tournament in Boston and was never the same player again. He and Williams drifted apart. Ivankovich dropped basketball as a freshman at Northwestern and went on to medical school. Williams played four seasons in Division I: two at Cincinnati, then two at Bradley. His senior season in 1986, he led the Braves to a top-20 finish and their first NCAA Tournament victory in 31 years. "He was a monster on the floor," says Jim Les, Bradley's point guard at the time and now the coach at Cal-Davis. "He played with this scowl on his face."

The Warriors drafted Williams in the third round, but his game proved too unpolished beyond the post. He was cut in October of his rookie season and spent the next three years in the CBA, between brief stints for the Kings and Hawks. Beginning in 1990, he found better success abroad, starring for teams in Spain, Italy and Greece, among other places. He retired in 2000, feeling he'd done right by his talent.

Upon his return to the States, he worked random jobs, but his steadiest and most satisfying work came as a celebrity bodyguard. It surprised his friends, but Williams told them, "I gotta do something with this body I've been given." He'd get calls from Diddy in LA at midnight on Thursday, and by Friday night he'd be leading him through a club in Atlanta. He'd spend days on yachts with Jay-Z and Beyonce and work nights at award shows like the Oscars. To keep up with the fast-paced lifestyle, Williams did hundreds of push-ups a day, ran sprints and stairs and got his legs so flexible he could do the splits.

By 2009, however, Williams was ready to try a job with less travel. Working out of Atlanta, he dabbled in commercial real estate with a childhood friend, Reggie Chapman, and in November of that year, he brokered his first big deal. He just had to sign some papers in Chicago, and he'd bank \$250K. With the money, he wanted to move back to Roseland, maybe start up

some youth basketball camps or a community center. "You gotta get back here, Mike," Chapman told him. Williams booked a flight to Chicago. It was to take off at 8 in the morning on Nov. 29.

A FEW WEEKS after sending his e-mail to Ivankovich, Williams rolls into the doctor's office at Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital and says, "So you're gonna get me walkin' again?"

Ivankovich is wearing all black, as always, and a necklace made from human bone, a gift given to him in appreciation of his work in Haiti. It's been a busy 30 years since he last saw Williams. He lost himself to depression following his knee injury; he recovered by learning a mean blues guitar and by becoming one of the most prolific orthopedic surgeons in Illinois. In 2010, he started OnePatient Global Health Initiative, a nonprofit that provides health care to the underserved. When he wants something done, it gets done. To move Suy from Haiti to Chicago, he persuaded a U.S. Army major general to send an ICE team escort.

Now at Schwab, the doctor bends down and prods the legs of his newest patient. Williams says he can feel some of the pokes. Ivankovich asks him to try lifting his legs. There -- just barely -- they move. "Oh man," Ivankovich says. "Dude, you really might walk again." But again, he promises Williams nothing.

A week later, in July 2010, rehab begins. Williams is too weak to sit up on his own, so Ivankovich and his team work to rebuild his core: They twist him, turn him, prop him up, lay him down. They also start in on his legs, lifting, bending and stretching them. White heat sears through Williams. He screams so loudly he scares off some of the therapists.

"Do not loosen the reins on this guy," Ivankovich tells them. "Beat on his ass. He's a former pro athlete. He'll respond."

The doctor is callous, almost brutal, with his former teammate. When Williams tells him one day that he's had enough, Ivankovich brings in pink panties and a megaphone.

"Put 'em on or get your ass working," he says.

"I always knew you were crazy," Williams responds.

"Hey, I could always take your ass. Could take you right now."

"Nah. You couldn't jump over a piece of paper."

"Yeah, well, you're looking real hot yourself."

Williams laughs, a deep, rolling laugh. Every little joyful moment helps. The twisted irony is that with a more serious injury, he would have suffered less. He's an incomplete paraplegic. Though his legs can't move, they retain limited nerve activity. This creates hope that he might walk again but also ensures that every therapy session is agony. Amplifying his pain, two bullets remain in his spine.

The mental battle is much worse. Williams still grieves over what he's lost. He can't urinate without a catheter. He can't have sex. There is the awful business of relieving his bowels. He feels he's a burden. His mother, who teaches Bible lessons and Sunday school, cuts her days short to visit and bring food. Ivankovich spends hours with him, time that Williams thinks would be better spent on other patients. His therapy is paid through Medicaid, and he hates that taxpayers now finance his life.

He wrestles with one question all the time: "Why?" Why would a just God leave Williams in endless pain while the shooter walks the streets free of consequence? Some friends tell him God must be trying to get his attention. "F-- you," Williams says. "If he wanted my attention, give me two in the shoulder. But why take my legs?"

One summer day, sitting in bed, his wheelchair beside him, he says, "There are times I really can't say what I'd do if someone handed me a gun."

Ivankovich, uncertain of what else to do, shares with Williams his own darkness. He confesses that when his knee blew out, he lost more than his athleticism. "I've always felt like that left a part of me dead," he says. His injury, of course, didn't compare to paralysis, but, he tells Williams, the body is an athlete's most precious instrument, his means to lasting significance. If it deserts him, for whatever reason, the anguish is real and deep. Ivankovich would never know his physical potential. He had to accept that reality, just as Williams must now. "The basketball player, the athlete, the person who was indestructible, is gone," Ivankovich says to him. "That person can't come back. It's not possible." He tells Williams that the only way to walk again -- hell, to live again -- is to let go of the body he once had.

Something changes in Williams after that conversation. He progresses from an hour of rehab a day to four. He goes six days a week instead of five. Therapists order five sets of stretches; Williams demands two more. In August, he rolls over and sits up. It makes him feel, for the first time since he hit the Club 426 floor, as if he has some semblance of control.

About a week later, Ivankovich tells Williams he'd like to see whether he can stand. They wheel him to the facility's gym. Nurses strap custom-fit braces around his lower legs. Williams is put before a platform walker, about chest-high from his seated position. He puts his thick arms on it and pushes up. His legs wobble and feel like rubber. He closes his eyes and lifts his head as high as it will go. His back straightens. He puts his weight on his legs. He feels his size again.

Now is the time to try for more. Ivankovich orders Williams back to the gym the next day. The big man wheels in, grabs the railing and rises, huge and wobbly and free. He rolls his lips shut and strains. He haltingly lifts his left foot, drags it across the linoleum floor and plants it

again, a few inches ahead. He lifts his right foot, higher this time, moves it four or five inches ahead and plants it. His left foot again: forward, plant.

His legs tremble. Sweat pours. Ivankovich wheels Williams' chair beneath him, and he sits down. Everyone in the room is bawling.

A DAY OR TWO after Williams walks again, his 17-year-old daughter, Amarah, stops by Schwab to see him for the first time since the shooting. She was born of an old relationship and lives in St. Louis. Before his injury, they spoke maybe twice a month. Now it's at least twice a week, and they text almost daily. She's a terrific high school basketball player, a monster inside, just like Dad. Williams tells her he wants to wear her jersey.

They take the elevator up to the serenity garden on Schwab's rooftop. The weather is clear and breezy. They talk about his rehab, about her college options. He tells her to go somewhere she feels comfortable; she's good enough that the pros will find her anywhere.

Mike rolls his chair beside a table and locks the wheels. He has this impulsive, foolish idea, one conceivable only by a father trying to make his daughter proud.

He shifts his weight, places his hands on the table and shoves himself upward. He isn't wearing his braces; there is nothing to support him, save the table and his atrophied legs. His ankles could crack under his weight. Still, he lifts his left foot and places it a few inches ahead. Shuffles his right foot behind. Starts to sweat. Takes another step, leans over on the table.

"I'm going to do this," he tells Amarah.

A few weeks later, as summer gives way to fall, Williams will move into GlenCrest Rehabilitation Centre, the same place Bazelaïis Suy got his legs back, and train with Mike Mitarotondo, an ex-football player, and Arnel Cordero, an MMA fighter. Every day he will be

pulled, pushed, twisted; he will sweat, roar, cry. By the holidays, he will take several steps at a time on his walker.

By the summer of 2011, a few months after one of the bullets is finally removed from his spine, greatly reducing his pain, he will take 50 steps at once. Every week they will be stronger and more fluid than the last. Ivankovich will be astounded. "You know I still can't promise you anything," the doctor will tell Williams, "but you've got a shot."

All that progress will be in the months ahead. But right now, on this rooftop, Williams just wants to take a few small steps and show Amarah something. The Chicago skyline rises to the east. Straining on his feet, he points his finger to the south, in the shadows of the skyscrapers.

There, he tells his daughter, lies Roseland.

LOVE AND BASKETBALL AND NIRRA FIELDS

WHEN NIRRA FIELDS visited UCLA last year, she saw something most people never do. It wasn't magic or anything—just something only someone like Nirra would notice.

In the UCLA Athletic Hall of Fame's trophy room, 108 national championship trophies cover two entire walls, gleaming a brilliant, deep gold against royal blue felt. No college on Earth has more. Most people who walk in here get swept up in the rich history, lost in all the gold. But not Nirra. She thought about how not one of the 108 was won by UCLA women's basketball. What she saw was an empty space, a trophy-sized swath of open blue.

Gunning for a national championship—yeah, that's probably overreaching for a girl at UCLA: The Lady Bruins have never even made the NCAA Final Four. But Nirra's whole life has been an overreach. Oh, sure, *now* she's one of the best basketball players in America and in an extravagant dash of fate, in high school she even ended up living with Mike Brown, the Los Angeles Lakers head coach. *But* she's only here because, four years ago, in a move that bordered on abandon, she left her home in a Montreal ghetto and with it her single mother and six brothers and a lot of pain.

You leave that, you can't be getting lost, in gold or anything else. You know all about emptiness.

Part 1

THE HOME NIRRA left behind is the bottom floor of a brown, government-subsidized duplex in a run-down borough outside Montreal called Lachine.

Four cracked cement steps lead to the Fields' front door. A pack of cigarettes stands upright on an upside-down orange bucket on the small front porch. When I visit this past September, it's a cool and rainy Saturday morning and Nirra's mother greets me, smiling in the doorway. She wears a black Adidas tracksuit and black Adidas basketball shoes and a loose white do-rag holds her hair. She has brown eyes and freckles rolling in and along deep laugh lines. Her name is Faith.

She apologizes for the house. Some of it's under renovation and most of the rest needs it. Has since they moved in seven years ago.

"But it's not what a house looks like," Faith says. "It's that it feels like a home." Then she laughs—a sudden, husky, loud laugh that ends with a throaty smoker's cough.

The front door has no inside doorknob. Lining the hallway beyond are doors to the living room, three bedrooms and a bathroom. On the living room shelves and walls are family pictures and more than 100 trophies and medals. Some of Nirra's jerseys drape over a black futon, including Team Canada and the McDonald's All-American West team. On a small brown table sit a few magazine articles about Nirra, one proclaiming her "the most talented basketball player to ever come out of Canada."

Also on the wall is a painting: three boys on a sidewalk play in the water of an exploded fire hydrant while on apartment steps behind them sit a girl and a black angel in robes, watching over her brothers together.

At the end of the hall is the kitchen. Faith is cooking apple crisp. It smells amazing.

Out back, through the kitchen door, there's a junky, decrepit driveway about forty feet wide. It's separated from the next duplex over by a faded red fence with pieces missing. Two beat-up bicycles stand against the side of the house. Two more lie on the ground. Weeds push

through cracked asphalt. Miscellaneous junk scatters the area, including a broken table, a broken wood chair, two orange traffic cones, and two bald basketballs. Two white, dirty, unused garage doors are losing their paint. In front of them stands a beat-up basketball goal, its black rim bent forward as though dunked on one time too many. It has no net. There's a lane painted on the ground in white. Nirra did that for them as a kid.

NIRRA AND HER FAMILY always talk first about the good times, and those are mostly about sports.

She and her six brothers—five older—played pickup basketball all the time, often at an outdoor court down the street and on the one Nirra made for them. Faith would get off the bus from work, and even at midnight on school nights she could hear them all the way down the street. She'd find them behind the house, drenched in sweat and going at each other like it was Game 7 of the NBA Finals.

Those were some of the only times she got to see Nirra play.

Nirra got into organized sports around age 10. First was football. All her brothers—five are older, one's younger—started playing for the LaSalle Warriors by age 5, and she'd been to a million of their practices and games. They were always their team's best players. "It was actually pretty strange," says LaSalle's president Larry Burns. "They were all always so good. All of them. If they hadn't all been such screwballs when they were younger, they all would've made it somewhere."

Nirra played four years, and she turned out to be a better football player than most guys. "She'd take over a game like some stud dude would," says former teammate Ryan Forrest. "It was ridiculous."

One year, she won Most Improved Player. “She should’ve won MVP,” says Chris, who’s two years Nirra’s senior, “but they didn’t want to give it to a girl.”

When asked about Nirra, her old coaches, teammates, and even opponents go on and on. She’d score four touchdowns one game, pick off four passes the next. She knocked one team’s star receiver out of a game with a brutal tackle. When one guy who outweighed her by 50 pounds tried to tackle her, she put him down with such a vicious stiff-arm that he, winded, had to be carried off the field. Guys would want to fight her until they saw who she was.

“We’ve never had a girl play out here remotely close to Nirra’s ability,” says Burns. “Not only that—most of the guys that play out here weren’t as good as her.”

SAME WENT FOR basketball. Nirra started at D.J. Sports at the Burgundy Athletic Center gym just after she started football. Founder Dexter John and Nirra’s coach Jean Moise Louis-Charles (who goes by “Moise”) discovered her one day at her elementary school thanks to a tip from the principal. When she played pickup basketball during lunch, all the *boys* wanted to play with the *girl*.

Moise didn’t know what to make of Nirra—she was super quiet, almost never speaking except to say, “Yes, coach.” Then came Nirra’s first game. Her age group played on eight-foot-rims. Two tall girls intimidated her teammates away from the basket. Nirra took the ball, raced down the lane straight at the giants, leapt into them and cocked the ball with two hands behind her head and then dunked a thunderous dunk. The gym didn’t roar. It went silent.

“It was crazy,” says her oldest brother Anthony. “One minute—she always secluded herself, she was the girl of the house, her and Mom doing the dishes together. Then the next thing you know, she’s out there dunking on people.”

“That’s the thing about Nirra,” Moise says. “Other players are always talking, talking, talking. She just plays.”

BY AGE 13, Nirra had seen the movie *Love and Basketball* and she’d bought into what her older brothers kept preaching, that they could find a life in their games. She’d begun asking Moise for advice. *How can I make the WNBA? How can I be Candace Parker? How can I be a female Kobe Bryant?*

“There’s so much politics in that world,” Moise wisely told her. “To be above politics, you need to be *real* good. You need to be the person that people *want*. If you’re just a star, you’re bright as other stars, and that’s a problem. ... You have to be brighter than the other stars.”

Nirra studied YouTube videos of Kobe, LeBron, and more, taking different pieces from all their games and practicing all of it until it was as much a part of her as her very breath. She’d spend all weekend at the gym with Moise and the other D.J. Sports teams. She’d run full speed up and down the court, layups on each end, for an hour, mixing in jumpers, spin moves, crossovers, pull-up threes, and everything else in between, imagining herself taking NBA’s superstars one-on-one. She’d practice with the DJS men’s teams and play full-court one-on-one with their best players, wearing them out.

Nirra moved up an age level each year with DJS, at age 12 playing with 13-year-olds, at 13 playing with 15s, and at 14 playing with 17s.

“And she didn’t just *do* each division,” says John. “She *dominated* each division.”

She’d made a 21-year-old starting point guard on a local college team cry. At age 14 she made Team Quebec’s U-17 team. They put her on U-15. Her first tournament, in Vancouver—where she was born—they finished third but Nirra was named tournament MVP, the first time in

the tournament's history the award went to a player not on the winning team. She'd averaged 42 points per game. The next summer she made Team Canada. She was every team's best player.

“She wanted to be the best all the time,” Moise says. “And you need to understand—that's unusual here. In Canada, it's different. You be conservative. She had that American mentality in Canada, and I'd really like to know where she got it. Because you can't teach it. She just had it. That was always—it was a good thing, but it was very strange.”

WHEREVER IT CAME FROM, by 15 Nirra's American mentality had exhausted all competition and opportunity in Canada. Moise connected her with some friends of his, Stanley Williams and Romeo Augustine, who in turn connected her with Mike Duncan, an AAU coach in Cleveland, who had places for her to play if she wanted. After playing with Team Canada that summer and getting destroyed by Team USA, Nirra made up her mind.

It was an impossible decision. Her family had made her who she was, and they needed her.

BEFORE SHE DISCOVERED her knack for sports, Nirra wanted to be a lawyer: they make good money, they can usually find work, and they get people out of trouble. Her family was always in trouble—her brothers with police (fighting and robbery, mostly), her mother with men, all of them with bad men stealing their money and homes and peace of mind. Sometimes they lived in homeless shelters. Faith had them with three different, disastrous men. Not one's around today. Nirra's father, Allen, stole all their money during the Great North American Ice Storm of 1998. Before that, they hid from a different one of Faith's boyfriends who they knew only as

Hartford. Later they'd see him on America's Most Wanted for murdering another girlfriend's kids.

THEY LIVED LIKE SPARTANS. When Nirra and her brothers first moved to Lachine, their only furniture was one bed. They let Mom take that. They slept on the floor together in the same room. "All we had," Faith says, "was love and air."

They'd fight each other for fun, throwing down WWE-style in an empty room. Even being the only girl among boys—and the sixth child out of seven—she'd find ways to come out on top. This trained her to fight when she needed to as well, whether for food or for protection. If you didn't get to the kitchen in time, you fought for your share or you didn't eat. When a bully wanted to fight her on the bus home from school when she was 10, an older girl who put on four rings like brass knuckles, Nirra stuck her four times—*pop-pop-pop-POP!*—in the eye. The girl went down crying. When a strange boy harassed her in the park she gave him a black eye and a swift kick somewhere else and left him on the ground in the fetal position.

AS NIRRA GREW older, since Faith was always gone at work, Nirra did a mother's work. She did their dishes and laundry. She consoled A.J., the youngest, when times were hard. She learned how to cook so she could feed them.

The thought of leaving them scared her. The only thing stronger was the fear she'd get stuck here with them. But her brothers told her to go. They'd miss her, but they saw her future: a college degree, a career, a life beyond Lachine. They didn't feel afraid—they felt proud.

Mom was the hardest to ask. Nirra knew how important she was to her, even for the simple fact that she was a girl. By the time Faith had her third son, Shawn—nine years before

Nirra—she'd wanted a baby girl so bad that she put a pink bow on his head for a few days, anyway. She spent days deciding her name, finally choosing "Nirra" after seeing a TV special about a girl from Nigeria who'd been miraculously healed. Her name was "Naira," after Nigeria's currency.

"I feel like God is looking at me and telling me, 'It's okay,'" Faith said. "So, go. Just make sure, while you're down there, you remember where you've come from and what you've gone there to do, because if it doesn't work out, you're going to have to come back here, where it's going to be like starting over."

Part 2

NO MATTER WHAT she had to endure, Nirra would not start over.

In three years after leaving Canada Nirra moved seven times and attended three different schools, one for each grade. Her sophomore year she started out living with a family Mike Duncan had set her up with in his city, Cleveland. He'd helped her enroll at Regina, a Catholic girls school and basketball powerhouse. Well, the family's daughter played for Regina, too. When Nirra stole her thunder and playing time, things got tense and Nirra went from sharing their room to sleeping on the couch.

Duncan found her a new family where she had her own room, but then their kids stole her things.

On top of all that, her grades were hurting, and there was more drama on the team—as always, Nirra quietly kept to herself, and she got along fine with most teammates. She'd also clearly become Regina's best player, though, and as it often goes for new kids with drive and

ambition, her success also became a curse. On the bus home from a game, a girl and her friends would bully Nirra in a back corner, mocking and berating her. One night it became too much, and Nirra flashed back to 10 years old, when she beat up the bully on the bus. It'd be easy to put this one down, too. But instead she pulled out her cell phone and called her mom.

Faith reminded her that the foreign girl almost always gets the blame, and if she got in any trouble, it could undo everything. "You might have to eat a little s— before you can deal it," Faith said. So Nirra took some breaths and unfolded her trembling fists, remembering where she'd come from and where she wanted to go.

DUNCAN EVENTUALLY TOOK Nirra in himself, having decided to quit worrying what people would think about an adult single male taking in a teenaged girl. He knew Nirra, he'd met Faith, and he had a big heart. He became Nirra's legal guardian for eligibility reasons and gave her a room, a key to the house and all the privacy a girl could ask for.

She channeled her worries about those back home and her frustrations with those where she was now always into basketball. She'd rise before the sun to jog a few miles every morning. All her free time outside of school and practice and homework went to the game. She worked out multiple times per day and kept studying elite players on TV and YouTube, particularly coming to love Chris Paul and Derrick Rose. She'd jog two miles from Duncan's house to Euclid Park, where she'd get shots up and drill for hours or until the men showed up—Euclid draws Cleveland's best ballers. But instead of leaving, she'd run with them—and beat them.

She became what she left home to be, a star shining brighter than all others. When Regina closed, Nirra transferred to Oak Hill Academy, the boarding school in Virginia, for her junior

year, where she again became her team's best player and where so many letters came from college coaches wanting her she ran out of space for them in her room.

In time Duncan also became something more, something Nirra never had before: A grown man who wouldn't hurt or disappoint her. She'd found a father.

SINCE A TRIP BACK home would cost too much, for Thanksgiving that year, Nirra stayed with Duncan. That's where she met Mike and Carolyn Brown, who'd stayed in Cleveland after Mike lost the Cavaliers coaching job. Duncan wanted Nirra to get to know a good family, especially a good woman, so he invited the Browns to Thanksgiving dinner. They hit it off and grew close over the coming weeks. She spent a few nights with them, and then, at their invitation, moved in with them.

When Mike was hired to coach the Lakers in the late spring of Nirra's junior year, she was invited along to Los Angeles to find a new house and tour Mater Dei.

Carolyn would save her, getting Nirra's disjointed, crazy life on track. She discovered several academic issues that would've otherwise left Nirra ineligible. One, her tuition had somehow gone unpaid at both her former schools. Two, Nirra had somehow failed a biology course and never been told, which she had to make up before Mater Dei's schoolyear started. Further complicating matters, Nirra had gone to Chile for the summer to play in a FIBA U-19 tournament with Team Canada

Carolyn enrolled Nirra in an online course, sent her textbooks and talked her through much of the homework. She also hired tutors to help with what she could not. Nirra passed with a B. She also led Team Canada in scoring nearly every game, and that summer, she finally got

something else she'd been wanting ever since she moved: revenge. That summer, Team Canada finally beat Team USA.

By the start of her senior year at Mater Dei in Santa Ana, CA, ESPN had Nirra ranked No. 12 overall for her class and No. 3 at her position. She'd win a state championship with Mater Dei and become the first Canadian girl to play in the McDonald's All-American game—where she led all scorers with 20 points.

There were still rough spots. The McDonald's game was particularly frustrating. Most girls go in just happy to be there. That's what Nirra would also later tell the media during the post-game press conference—that she was just happy her shots were falling, that it was an honor to play with such talent. You'd never guess it watching the interview, but she was fuming inside.

Fresh off her state title with Mater Dei, Nirra had come off the bench with the West down by eight. She went 9-for-11 and led a charge back. Then, not long after she scored her 20th point, four away from Candace Parker's record, she was benched with eight minutes left in the game. She never went back in. The West lost by a point. She held it together for postgame interviews, then found somewhere private and called people—Mom, Stanley Williams, Mike Duncan—and vented like they'd never heard. She'd seen this game as her time to prove herself on an American national stage. *Why didn't I get to play? Because I'm still not good enough? Because I'm Canadian? Should I have done something different?*

Whatever the case, Nirra shoved it behind her. Life otherwise was too good. She was also named Ms. Basketball California by ESPN and Gatorade Player of the Year, and she'd pulled her grades up to a B average. And she did it all while living as far away as possible from where she'd come from, having gone from a small, run-down duplex to a 9,500-square foot, \$3 million

mansion on East Copa de Oro drive in Anaheim Hills, 2,900 miles from home, hidden and safe somewhere behind a gate.

It was almost perfect.

HAVING LEARNED OF Nirra's upbringing, Carolyn wanted their relationship to reach a new kind of mother-daughter level, almost like Leigh Ann Tuohy with Michael Oher in "The Blind Side." Where Mike Duncan had worked to keep Faith and the Fields involved with Nirra, Carolyn actively worked to cut them out of Nirra's life. The Browns declined many interview requests for this story, but by all accounts, Carolyn got carried away with what she expected for—and from—Nirra.

Nirra had to choose: The Browns or the Fields. Luxury and security or the ghetto.

Part 3

NOW NIRRA LIVES in a tiny UCLA dorm room too small for a television.

It's a cool September morning in Los Angeles. Nirra's just left UCLA's Student Activities Center after an hour of pickup with some teammates. Before that she had team weightlifting for another hour. Now she heads across campus to the Wooden Center, where she'll work for eight hours. She wears royal blue shoes with yellow trim, neon yellow shin-high socks, blue shorts with white trim, a form-fitting black tank top and her long hair in a ponytail halfway down her back. She hasn't bothered with makeup. No need.

Every college in America wanted her. She'd sat down with Mike Brown multiple times a week for months, sifting through the countless offers. UConn. Baylor. Duke. Tennessee. She

chose UCLA for several reasons. Great city. Great school that offered what she wanted out of college even if, God forbid, something ended basketball. Great coach in Cori Close—the lady’s even teaching Nirra how to drive a car. And of course, the emptiness in the trophy room. Nirra’s never been comfortable hopping on the shoulders of giants. She likes to build.

Walking the steps to the Wooden Center, her ankle throbs, but she doesn’t limp. She hurt it a few days ago, playing pickup here with a bunch of guys. Probably a bad idea nowadays, but you know—old habits and whatnot. Besides, guys just challenge her more.

Today she works the front desk. When she can she uses her iPhone to check her schedule. She’s at the tail end of her second summer session. In a few days she’ll have a week off before the fall semester begins. She wants to go visit Lachine.

Yes, she chose the Fields. Of *course* Nirra’s grateful to the Browns, and neither she nor her family hold a grudge. But if you make Nirra choose to whom she is a daughter and sister, she will always choose those back where she’s come from.

TWO SUNDAYS LATER Faith Fields takes her apple crisp over to the home of her second oldest son, Michael, 29, where the Fields family is having a big cookout. It’s a nice two-story home in a borough called Brossard. His kids and nieces and nephew run around his yard while Michael grills chicken. Upstairs there’s more food than the family can possibly hope to eat, even with all the kids.

Nirra couldn’t make it. Too expensive, again, and that frustrated her. “I need to go home,” Nirra says. “I miss Canada.” It’s been more than a year since she’s seen some of them, but the frustration is also strangely satisfying—such is the sacrifice of living a life not subsidized.

The Fields cookout became a five-hour party. They danced. They watched music videos starring Anthony, Michael and Shawn, with A.J. and Chris and Alex making cameos. They pulled up YouTube videos of Nirra playing basketball and cheered until they went hoarse, like they were watching her live.

Turns out it wasn't just sports bringing them together all these years—it was dreaming. They've all had friends die at 25 or younger on the street. Yet for all the reasons they could be split up or worse, here they are, dreaming on. It's something of a miracle, and they say Nirra has way more to do with it than she probably realizes.

"You have your father abandon you the way he did," Anthony says, "you want him to know that you're okay. You want him to know, *we didn't need you*. And you want him to know what he's missing out on. So yeah. I think there are a lot of reasons why she's doing this. I know she wants him to see all this."

Later, I'll remark to Anthony about how athletic all of them are even though not one of their fathers were athletes. He nods and talks about how they pushed each other beyond breaking. The big brothers led the younger kids on bootcamp-style workouts when they were as young as 8 years old, and Nirra went with them. They'd jog half an hour down a bike trail to Riverside Park, stopping only for pushups and situps. At the park was The Mountain, a steep 200-yard that they'd run up and down, up and down. The workouts were so brutal the kids cried, but their older brothers never let them quit.

"Cuss me now, love me later," they'd say.

But a lot of kids work out hard and never become what Nirra has, you say. Just seems like you guys had something extra—something special.

"It's love!" Faith exclaims. "They loved it!"

Anthony chuckles, then says to you, “Nobody’s told you yet? Who they say our grandfather is?”

FAITH’S MOTHER, SHIRLEY FIELDS, was 16 years old when she dropped her newborn baby girl off at a Montreal foster care agency, about nine months after a one-night stand. The agency officials asked her the baby’s name. Shirley gave her just one: Faith. “She’s going to need it,” Shirley said. Then she disappeared. Faith wouldn’t find her until she was 23 years old. Shirley had gone on to start a new life in Baltimore, where she married and bore four children.

The man many—including Faith’s half-brothers—believe to be Faith’s father met Shirley at a Montreal club one night that was a popular stop for athletes in town. Shirley was working at the club as a model for a fashion show.

Even after her brothers told her, Faith hesitated to believe. Then she met Pappy Scott, an old family friend whom she met by chance when he once stopped by a Tim Horton’s restaurant where she was working. He recognized her.

“What’s your last name?” Scott asked her.

“Fields.”

His face lit up. “Fields? Shirley Fields’ daughter? The one she left here?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, so *you’re* Sugar Ray’s daughter!”

“What?”

“You were never told?” Pappy laughed. And then he told her what her brothers and some cousins had also told her.

Faith wasn't sure she wanted to believe him, but when the man died in 1991 she couldn't help it anymore. His obituary and his picture—his smile—were in all the papers. Faith had seen pictures of the other man who could be her father, and she hadn't recognized him. But this man—when Faith saw him, she also saw her children. She saw them so clearly she wept.

The man was Walker Smith, Jr., better known as one of boxing's all-time greats, Sugar Ray Robinson.

AT ONE POINT during the cookout, Faith's cell phone rings. She squeals. "It's Nirra!"

Nirra gets passed around to everyone, and there's so much love and laughter.

"We miss her like crazy," says A.J.

"But at the same time," says Anthony, "we're glad she's not here, you know? Because that means she's still off doing her thing big. And that makes us want to do better, too."

Anthony has moved even further from the ghetto than Michael, 45 minutes out of the city, next to a giant lake. Shawn, 27, is a father and budding rapper. Alex, 22, is actually off to college too, playing ball at a small school in Toronto. Chris, 20, is in adult education classes to finish his high school diploma. And A.J., 16, might get to go to the States to explore promising football opportunities.

One of the last people Nirra talks to is her niece, Shyelle, Michael's 10-year-old daughter. They talk about soccer, Shyelle's favorite sport, and then they talk about *The Hunger Games*, Shyelle's new favorite movie—the one about a dystopian society short on food, where kids kill each other to survive. Shyelle tells Nirra about the bow and arrows she and Daddy made out of rubber bands and limbs from the yard.

“She makes us want to be better, all of us,” says Shawn. “We don’t want our little sister out there doing it alone. We really see now if you work hard, the right way, it really takes you places.”

Just like The Mountain at Riverside. They’d kill themselves on that thing, but it was always worth it. When you get to the top of The Mountain, there’s a clear plateau to stand on, up above the whole world.

When they’re done, Shyelle grabs her weapons and like Katniss Everdeen, heroine of *The Hunger Games*, notches a shot and lets it fly.

ALL THIS TIME, all the figurative mountains Nirra’s climbed have come with the weight of her family’s worlds on her shoulders. Now, having shown them how it’s done, her brothers all finally work as hard in life as they did in sports. Now they have enough food to eat until they’re stuffed and still left with a table full of leftovers—now they have much more than only love and air. Now for them and their next generation, they don’t dream of surviving but becoming heroes, because now survival’s just another game.

So Nirra now turns to a different kind of empty space, the one in the trophy room. It’s not a dream. It’s just at the top of another mountain. McDonald’s didn’t go how she hoped, but now there’s less than ever holding her back, and besides, lights shine brighter on higher mountains.

BEFORE UCLA’S SEASON BEGAN, Nirra was called to Close’s office. They talked about pressure. About what Nirra was expected to do and to be: The best teammate. The most thoughtful friend. The hardest worker. The best player.

We can have a phenomenal season, Close told her, and a phenomenal four years. But more than anyone else on the team, that's on you.

“Are you ready for that?” Close asked. “Does that scare you, or does it excite you?”

As usual, Nirra didn't say much. She just looked back in her coach's eyes and grinned.

LIFE FOR FIGHTING

On this cool June morning in Toronto, Chris and Anthony Stewart, along with a handful of other NHL hockey players, sweat in a small weight room at St. Michaels Gym. They're competing to see who can get the most velocity out of a 225-pound clean—that is, who can lift the weight from floor to chest the fastest. A thin cable connects the bar to a machine, on which a good score, the score their trainer Matt Nichol pushes them for, is 1.5 to 1.7. Chris, the younger brother who's recently taken over as the Stewart family hockey star after a veritable lifetime in Anthony's shadow, registers right around 1.5. Anthony steps up and in four cleans registers anywhere from 1.69 to 1.91. Big bro's always *big bro*.

After the workout, Chris says he'll get up with me later, then disappears.

Both of the brothers were first-round NHL draft picks, Anthony in 2003 and Chris in 2005, the odds of which, because they are black and grew up indigent, are worse than their odds of getting hit by lightning after winning the lottery after turning water into wine. Now Anthony plays for the Carolina Hurricanes and Chris for the St. Louis Blues.

Anthony's been great, taking me through all their old life, walking me through the horror they survived and how they did it. Chris, on the other hand, bails on meetups and dodges calls and texts. He doesn't even have voicemail set up on his phone.

And sure enough about 30 hours later, there's no further word from Chris. When I tell Anthony, he says, "We're gonna fight."

Yeah, well—story of their lives.

Part One

“I wanna go to hockey.”

THE STEWART BROTHERS grew up in the worst parts of Toronto, where how well you fought was how long you survived.

“If you have a problem or a dispute, you fight, and the winner gets what he wants,” Chris says. “It’s that simple. It just gets in you growing up the way we did. You grow up getting into fights every day, seeing the things you do every day, you have to develop that anger. It gives you this edge. It’s a survival thing.”

When Chris was 8 years old, during a trip for a hockey tournament, he was playing mini-sticks in a hotel parking lot with some teammates. Some 13-year-olds from another team showed up and told them to move—they wanted to play.

“No,” Chris said. “What do you mean, you want to play? We’re playing. Go play somewhere else.”

One of them shoved Chris and told him to leave. Chris slugged the guy in the stomach, threw him to the ground, and hit and kicked him until he quit moving. Then he glared at the kid’s teammates.

“WHO’S NEXT?”

They ran away.

Chris has always been the more aggressive one, both on and off the ice. Had to be. Anthony was always a big kid, but Chris for a long time was short and kind of fat. Fighting earned him respect. “Chris was pretty much a badass,” Anthony says. “You really didn’t want to

fight him. Because if you did, even if you actually beat him up, then I came and beat you up. You couldn't win with us."

When possible, Anthony played peacemaker—everyone's big brother. Around age 10 his family moved into a big apartment building, and one of his new neighbors who lived there, a guy a couple years older, put Anthony through an initiation: Anthony could either fight him or hike to the top of the building and bash in the door of a "witch." Anthony chose to hike and bear a curse rather than bruise someone.

But even he couldn't avoid every fight, whether for Chris or himself. "When you grow up the way we did, in places like we did," Anthony says, "you get really angry. Kids got to get that anger out. For us it was hockey, but fighting also. You gotta get that anger *out* somehow."

Sometimes they fought on their own. Often they fought together. The worst was when the anger made them fight each other. It nearly destroyed them—and then it saved them.

SURE, THE STEWART BROTHERS LOVED hockey's speed and grace and athleticism and skating, but as much as those, if not more, they loved that fighting was legal. It's a sport into which anger and violence translates usefully. Dropping their gloves to resolve concerns with whatever bareknuckled fury they felt necessary—particularly as they learned about and experienced racism—felt *right*, even pure.

"Sure, being black guys playing this basically all-white-guys sport, we heard some stuff," Anthony says. "But in hockey you can fight, so things had a way of working themselves out pretty easily."

Anthony broke a kid's jaw once.

But even with its fighting, what draws two indigent black kids to the costliest—and possibly whitest—mainstream youth sport out there? You hear stories of such kids in other sports—football, baseball, basketball, boxing, etcetera—but never in hockey. Back then it cost around \$5,000 a year *per kid*. Now it's closer to ten grand.

Simple: the Stewart brothers' father loved hockey first, and he loved them more than anything.

NORMAN STEWART, A WARM MAN with a deep, rich Jamaican accent, moved to Montreal just in time for the Canadiens' spectacular run. They won the Stanley Cup in 1971, 1973, then three straight from 1976 to 1979 and another in 1986. Norman fell in love.

From birth the Stewart brothers watched hockey on television with their father. As soon as Anthony was old enough, he was in skates—big, old hand-me-downs from their cousin Pat Barton, a great young player in the area. He'd provide most of Anthony's gear over the next several years, which would then be passed down to Chris. It was always too big, but it was free.

As masterful as the Stewart brothers were at fighting, it wasn't like they just beat up everyone on the ice. They were unstoppable on the ice—once they got on it, anyway, which was often a neat trick itself. On top of league fees, Norman had to pay per game—not to attend, but so the boys could play.

They didn't have that kind of money.

“We'd get there,” Anthony says, “and he'd just, ‘Oh, I'll get you the money, mon, just let 'em play today and I'll get you the money.’ He has the gift of gab. To this day he probably owes people money for letting us play.”

Then the brothers would play so good that the next time, people at the door would just wave them through.

“I think that’s part of why we were so good,” Anthony says. “We were playing not just to win a game that day, but so we could go back for the next game. We were playing for our lives.”

ALL THEIR CHILDHOOD, the Stewart family—Norman and the blue-eyed blonde mother of his children Sue Reid and their sons and five daughters—bounced from one decrepit home to another, hotels and motels and worn-down condos or houses.

One in particular was especially bad, the East Side Motel on Kingston Road. It’s inhabited mostly by government-subsidized families, drug addicts, and men checking in for an hour after picking up one of the hookers patrolling the sidewalks. The Stewart brothers watched sometimes. Hey, you’re 10, 12 years old, you’re bored late at night and looking in darkness—for that’s all you know—for something that feels like light and joy, so you go peek through the external air conditioners’ vents. They got caught sometimes, but by the time people ran outside—having to get dressed first and all—the boys were long gone.

“It was just an embarrassing place to say you lived,” Anthony says. So they’d pretend they didn’t. To get to his middle school, which was just two blocks down the street, instead of taking the sidewalk by the parking lot, Anthony crossed the parking lot and climbed two wood fences like they were prison walls and escaped through a neighborhood townhome development. When Chris reached middle school, he took it even further. He climbed the fences and then walked 45 minutes to go through a different neighborhood.

Anthony kept it up even—especially—when got a girlfriend, Chante. They’d walk back from school together, then sit on a big, green electrical box on the road across from the buildings

and talk. When he left, Anthony would walk alone back behind the buildings and wait until certain Chante was gone before he'd climb back over the fence.

“When you're a kid, you don't understand your parents' situation,” Anthony says.
“You're just like, *Why do we have to live here?*”

NORMAN STEWART WAS BORN AND RAISED as the destitute son of Jamaican farmers. He emigrated to Montreal in his early twenties, where he had family who'd spoken of opportunities for men willing to work.

In his late thirties, about a decade and a half after arriving in Canada, Norman met and fell in love with Sue.

“She is de matriarch, mon,” says Norman, pointing to a massive framed painting of her that hangs in his living room today. He has an almost permanent smile. “A beautiful soul, mon. Let me tell you. Beautiful soul. She was my friend first. It was not a color thing. Someone tells me, she is white, you are black, but I did not see no color. You understand. It was—“

Norman beats his chest.

“—from the heart, mon. It was just so *nat-u-ral*.”

Anthony was born in January 1985. Chris came two and a half years later, in October 1987. (In the next seven years, they also had five daughters.)

Norman worked for next to nothing installing pools and doing whatever other odd jobs he could find. They moved to Toronto to find more work. Sue developed diabetes and other medical conditions that left her living off disability. (“Didn't help that she smoked two packs a day,” Anthony says.)

By modern North American standards, the Stewarts' quality of life was quite poor.

Norman and Sue were never great at saving money.

“But hard life here,” Norman says, “is like king’s life in Jamaica. Hard life here is no-ting, mon.”

One thing the Stewart family did well was celebrate, even if it was totally irresponsible. Whenever Norman and Sue would get paid, they blew it on the kids in a day, and almost always on food. “We’d feast like kings,” Anthony says. They’d send Anthony to the store for two dozen donuts. They’d get four pizzas, three cases of soda, McDonald’s. Within a day or two, it’d all be gone.

Every Christmas morning, the kids felt like Richy Rich. They’d come into the living room and there’d be just rows of presents under a little tree, so many they couldn’t sit down. Every year at least one big gift—a video game console, a television, something—had to be returned for rent money. “But they always did all they could to make us happy,” says Anthony.

And whatever happened, Norman made sure his sons never went without their hockey.

WHEN ANTHONY WAS 5 years old the Stewarts lived about two miles away from Malvern Arena. Every Saturday Anthony and his father woke at 6 a.m., ate strawberry-flavored sugar cookies, then loaded up with hockey gear pack mules and hiked through snow, rain, heat—whatever they had to. Sometimes they could convince a friendly bus driver to give them a free ride, but mostly they’d walk. Two dollars was too much to spend on a two-mile ride when their legs worked just fine.

One day they walked through a blizzard, shuffling through the snow up to their shins, careful to feel the ground before each step so they didn’t trip in a hole. Anthony carried his stick

and skates, both way too big for him. His father carried a bag holding Anthony's sweater, pads, gloves, and other gear. Anthony's toes went from numb to feeling like they were splitting into pieces. He started crying.

Anthony's father turned to him. "You all right?"

Anthony nodded and kept going, but he couldn't walk without limping.

"Son."

"My feet hurt."

Norman stopped. "Do you still want to go to hockey? Or would you rather go home?"

"I wanna go to hockey."

"Are you shu-ah?"

Anthony nodded.

Norman lifted Anthony onto his shoulders and picked up his son's stick and skates, and their two sets of footprints became one. Norman carried Anthony and everything else the final mile.

When Chris started playing, he walked with them; sometimes, Norman carried him, too.

At the arena, they played all day. First a league game, then hours of mini-sticks—a small version of pick-up hockey played in a concrete area beside the rink—and pickup hockey.

The Stewart brothers, especially Anthony, could get by with size and aggression, but what elevated them above the rest was their precision and puckhandling. They scored at will and however they wanted, having learned not only strength and power but also finesse, to preserve not only possession of the puck but also their sticks. If their sticks broke, they couldn't afford to replace them, and Norman raised them with too much pride to ask a friend for a loaner. Norman duct-taped the broken parts and told the boys, "No slap shots."

ANTHONY BECAME A SUPERSTAR. Newspapers and magazines ran dozens of articles about him. Teams recruited him. Chris was also a fine player, but the only attention he got was when people realized whose little brother he was. *Man*, they'd say, *you're gonna be GOOD someday.*

Around age six or seven, Anthony caught the attention of Shirley Ziemendorf, a mother who always drove past the boys on their walks to hockey. She began giving them rides. By age 9 Anthony was living with them to play for a team on the other side of town. They gave him whatever he needed. Around age 10, Anthony was discovered by Bob Law, who owned a junior hockey franchise. He told Anthony and Norman that his team was horrible, but with Anthony they could contend for the Greater Toronto Hockey League Cup within three years. He also said he believed Anthony had NHL potential.

“It is the most common picture, but it was like seeing the light at the end of the tunnel,” says Norman. “It was very small, very faint, but then it was there. And that is all we needed. To see that it was there.”

THE FIRST TIME ANTHONY BELIEVED he could make it was at a tournament in Detroit when he was 11. He was named tournament MVP, which earned him a brand-new pair of skates. He'd never had a brand-new anything. That's when he saw that hockey could get him what he wanted. After that, he told the newspapers and magazines, “I want to buy my mom a house.”

As a teenager he joined the Kingston Frontenacs of the Ontario Hockey League and became a star, living away from home for months at a time. Newspaper and magazine stories

piled up. Norman and Sue doted on him. When Anthony was home, Sue made him breakfast in bed and washed his clothes.

Meanwhile, Chris suffered on, anonymous and chubby and angry and losing faith.

CHRIS GOT SICK OF lugging gear to the bus station and the arena, and of spending money on hockey that they needed for other things, like food. People didn't give *him* rides or pay for *his* things. He wore Anthony's old gear and old skates, always a size too big. He used Anthony's old sticks, always too tall. He was just Chris, always Anthony Stewart's Little Brother, and he was getting sick of all of it. So by age 15, he quit.

His parents and community alike were stunned, but Chris never felt the need to explain and Norman knew better than to press. People asked Norman why he didn't make Chris stay in hockey when he had so much potential and Anthony was doing so well. Norman shook his head and said, "By that age they have to want it more than you want it. You can't want it for them."

Chris decided to play high school football, for which all he needed was a pair of cleats and a signed permission slip. He made varsity, played tight end, and had both fun and success. Coaches talked of scholarships.

But football didn't satisfy. It didn't get all the anger out.

Secretly Chris ached for hockey. Watching Anthony rise to live all for himself a life they'd dreamed up together—it hurt Chris in his gut. It made him hate. Lost and frustrated, Chris found a less healthy way of getting the anger out: He fought, often for no reason. Older and bigger kids, smaller and younger kids, adults. It didn't matter. Then one day, the person he fought was his brother.

ANTHONY WAS HOME from another superstar season in Kingston. Chris was on the phone. Anthony needed the phone to call his girlfriend, Chante, whose family had moved to California. Their mom made Chris hang up.

Chris erupted. He cursed and raged and threw all of Anthony's things of their duplex. "Get OUT OF HERE!" he roared. "You're not welcome here!"

Anthony said no. Chris tackled him through the door. They wrestled and punched. Chris relented when Anthony got him in a chokehold.

This fight was different from others in one important way, however: This fight, the winner still gave the loser what he wanted.

"I can't stay here," Anthony told Chante. "We're gonna kill each other."

He took his things off the yard and moved to California to stay with Chante and her family until it was time to return to Kingston.

ANTHONY'S NEXT SEASON in Kingston was his best ever and good enough to get him projected to go 25th overall in the 2003 NHL Entry Draft that summer. Invited to Nashville for the draft, Anthony also took his agent, his parents—and Chris.

The Florida Panthers took Anthony exactly when he'd been projected to go, at number 25. Anthony got an \$800,000 signing bonus. He went to the nice part of Scarborough and bought a huge \$500,000 house for his family.

Seeing Anthony on that stage made Chris realize something. He didn't hate his brother. He hated that hockey was over. So he started playing again. It was just pickup, but it was hockey.

A COUPLE MONTHS later, the Stewart brothers played pickup together. Anthony was impressed: Little bro had grown. Chris had ballooned to around 260, but he was as tall as Anthony and more importantly, even though he was huge, he could still fly around the ice and score at will.

Anthony told Chris to start training. Get in shape, and he'd get him a tryout with Kingston. He said, "You're too f—ing good to already retire."

Part Two

"Yeah. He can fight."

AFTER A YEAR of biking, lifting and running on the streets of Scarborough wearing trash bags in the thick summer heat, Chris was down to 245. He went to Kingston's fall 2004 tryout. The first period of the first scrimmage, he scored a goal and picked up an assist.

The coaches liked what he could do with a puck, but they had ample supply of scorers. They asked Anthony, "Can your brother fight?"

Anthony laughed. "Yeah. He can fight."

During intermission between the first and second period a coach told Chris, "You need to start a fight this period. You'll line up beside McElrone, and you're gonna fight him."

Chris laughed. *F—, okay*, he thought. *If THAT's what they need to see, I'm all right.*

He dutifully lined up beside McElrone and said, "Well, apparently we're supposed to fight."

"Yeah," McElrone replied. "I know."

The details are fuzzy, but what people remember is this: McElrone stuck Chris good in the eye at the start, but Chris didn't flinch. He popped McElrone several times, won the fight, made the team. Wore a black eye for his picture in the program all season.

Half the first season, Chris was a fourth-line guy or healthy scratch. Mostly he played only when assigned to beat somebody up. Halfway through the season, Anthony went to the World Junior Championships with Team Canada. He represented his country well alongside Sidney Crosby. They'd win silver, losing to Team USA in the finals. While they played, a local newspaper ran a huge feature story on Anthony, telling how he came from nothing and running pictures of his family cramming into their tiny living room with friends, all surrounding the TV. There was no mention of Chris's hockey at all in the story; he was labeled, simply, "Anthony's little brother."

But with Anthony gone, Chris got out of his shadow. Promoted to Kingston's third line, he notched 20 points in 18 games. That offseason, he trained more seriously than ever. He woke at 6 a.m. every day, just like he and Anthony used to when they were kids and had to walk to the arena, and he rode the bus for an hour to meet at Anthony's place in downtown Toronto. They worked out at Station Seven Gym, then went back to Anthony's place for lunch, then Chris bussed home. Every weekday.

The next year, Anthony, Crosby and Team Canada won gold while Chris played out of his mind for Kingston, putting together a better Frontenacs season than Anthony ever did. Anthony's best: 70 points with 32 goals and 38 assists. Chris: 87 points on 37 goals and 50 assists. By season's end Chris made first line and team captain, *and* he ranked seventh among North American hockey prospects and third in the OHL. That summer, the Colorado Avalanche took Chris with the 18th pick in the first round.

IT'S LIKE THEIR MOTHER HUNG ON just long enough to see it all come to be.

Later that summer, Anthony and his mother, Sue, got into a huge fight. Sue had allowed one of his sisters' boyfriends to live with them at the house he'd bought, and he didn't like it. Then the boy got his sister pregnant, and he wanted the kid evicted. Sue wouldn't do it. Things were said, the kind you wish you could take back later, but then it was too late. Anthony and Sue went two weeks without speaking another word to each other.

Then one morning at around 6:30 a.m., Anthony got an email from her. She apologized. She said she was proud of him. She said she was grateful, so grateful, for all he'd done for all of them. She said she loved him and she didn't want things to be this way.

He choked up and immediately wrote back, saying of course he forgave her, and of course, he was sorry, too. He said he'd talk to her later that day and make plans to meet up soon.

An hour later, a decade of medical problems and however many packs of cigarettes a day did Sue in. Sitting on the front porch of the house her son had bought her, Sue had a heart attack. She was gone before they got her off the porch.

Part Three

How It Feels

ON OCT. 21, 2011, in Raleigh, N.C., the Stewart brothers played against each for the first time in the NHL. Chris and the Blues beat Anthony and the Hurricanes 3-2 in overtime. They faced off a second time in March 2012 in St. Louis, where Carolina won 2-0. (Neither brother

registered a point either game.) After the St. Louis game, a reporter asked Anthony, “So how does it feel that Chris makes more money than you?”

Anthony just sort of looked at the guy sideways and curtly replied, “Good.”

Now he laughs, remembering that. “What a stupid question,” he says. “After the s—we’ve been through? Chris really is the story. Him making it after quitting—I mean, two years after he’d quit, two years back in the game, he’s a first-round pick and now he’s doing great. That’s a miracle, man.”

CHRIS LEAPFROGGED BIG BROTHER to become the family star. Made the cover of *The Hockey News* in 2010 after an explosive breakout year in 2009, in which he scored 64 points with Colorado. Doesn’t fight quite like when he started with Kingston. For awhile, he still played like that desperate, hungry kid from back then—if a teammate was wronged, he’d be the first guy to pick a fight. Finally a coach told him, “Hey, we’ve got guys for that. You don’t need to brawl with everyone all the time anymore.”

Last year he made \$2.7 million, and he was due for \$3.2 million this season.

MEANWHILE, ANTHONY’S NHL career didn’t develop like Chris’s. An injury forced him out of his first season. The 2004 NHL lockout wiped out the next. It took him awhile to get traction in the minors. He ended up nearly in debt, clinging to that huge house on \$50,000 a year. Eventually he had to unload it and find his dad and sisters a nice rental instead.

After yet another season in the minors for 2009-10, Anthony broke out, scoring 39 points with Atlanta for 2010-11 while averaging nearly 15 minutes per game, double previous years’ playing time. But then the Thrashers moved to Winnipeg and became the Jets, and rather than

dealing with arbitration they let Anthony go. He signed a two-year deal with Carolina worth \$1.8 million. Dissatisfied as he is with how things have gone, there's zero room to complain.

ANTHONY IS ENGAGED NOW, to his middle school girlfriend, Chante. They have a nine-month-old son, Mason, plus three dogs, two giant mastiffs and a tiny three-and-a-half legged Yorkie named Slader, after his Escalade. Slader's the bomb. Slader break dances. One year for Halloween they dressed him up like a rapper. He's thug, too. The other weekend, he busted free of the house and spent a weekend in the clink. And as I sat in Anthony and Chante's kitchen, Slader dragged the mastiff's massive bone around the hardwood floor, and when we laughed at him, he barked at us. A fighter, just like his master.

Chris's life is virtually the same, only minus the kid. He's also engaged and they have three dogs. This offseason he's living at Toronto's famous Thompson Hotel.

Both of the Stewart brothers passionately seek ways to give other kids a way out; they're doing whatever they can to make it affordable for them to make it out with hockey. They think the cost of youth hockey is ludicrous. They take in promising young prospects—rising NHL star Wayne Simmonds, for instance. His first few years in the league, Simmonds lived with Chris in Toronto; before that, he'd crash at that big house Anthony bought.

“We just want to keep up this cycle. That's just how you grow the game with minorities,” says Anthony. “Helping out on a grassroots level. Taking care of the next guy in line.”

They know all too well how terrible that next guy's life can go. It nearly got their father killed.

THE NEIGHBORHOODS FROM THEIR CHILDHOOD and the way kids handle things, it's even worse than it used to be. Back in their day kids just used fists. Now they use guns.

After Anthony was drafted, he went to the Kingston Penitentiary to tell his story. As he spoke he met eyes with an inmate who looked familiar. When he finished, on his way out of the room, he passed by the man, who met his eyes again, and nodded this time.

“Sup, man.”

It was the guy who'd made him go break down the witch's door. When he grew up he became a murderer. He'd drive his Cadillac from one Scarborough neighborhood to its rival—both of which the Stewart brothers had grown up in—and shoot someone. His life of violence had gone another way; that's the only way he could get the anger out.

He stalked Anthony's father one day. Norman was walking back from the store when he noticed a big Cadillac following him. He ducked behind a power grid box and called out, “Who are you? What do you want?”

“Bats-mon?” the killer said. “That you?”

“Yeah, what you want, mon?”

“I saw Anthony on TV!”

“Yeah, mon.”

“Where you all livin' now? I'll swing by sometime and catch up.”

“How about I just give you my phone number.”

The man waved and drove off. Norman got home safe. A homicide was reported in the area later that day.

THEY'RE BOTH DYING for the current NHL lockout to end. Norman's begging them to buy back that first house. They've got families of their own and dreams for their city. And last season was disappointing for both of them. Chris played so poorly in the Blues' first-round playoff series that he was scratched from the lineup. Anthony saw his ice time cut nearly in half.

"I'm back in that mindset," Chris says, "where I've got something to prove."

"Whatever it takes," says Anthony. "Even if I have to be more of a fighter again. If I have to fight 20 times, I'll fight 20 times. What's the saying? By hell or high water? I'll do whatever it takes. I know I'm a \$5 million a year player. I just haven't had a \$5 million season. But that's what I'm after. I don't feel like I've really tapped into my potential as a pro on the elite level."

Chris agrees: "I think what I've had going for me, beyond the usual brother stuff—the fact that I was the younger one, and so I could learn from his mistakes and all that—is that I've had to face even more adversity than he has. And so now Anthony's just coming out of that adversity, and I honestly won't be surprised when he just explodes. Because he's faced it now. We both have."

Whatever happens, they'll probably still fight some—hey, brothers just fight—but not like they used to, not with that hate, not when now all they have for each other is love.

Now if only Anthony could get Chris to return a phone call.

ANTHONY AND I DECIDE our best course of action will be trapping Chris in a corner at the next morning's 8 a.m. workout. It proves unnecessary. After our workout, Chris apologizes, says he's been having cell phone difficulties, etcetera etcetera. We meet at the Thompson Hotel.

He's actually super talkative and friendly. He just hates talking about the old days. Anthony appreciates their roots for the strength they give now—Chris leaves roots where he feels they belong, filthy and buried deep and out of sight.

I tell him I can't blame him. I tell him about where Anthony took me, their old horror. I tell him about going back to maybe the worst of them all, the East Side Motel.

FILMMAKERS USE EAST SIDE as backdrop for movies about drug dealers, addicts, prostitutes, and—you get the idea.

It was mostly green with a beat-up asphalt parking lot surrounded by a brown fence. Everything looks really faded. Two hookers walked up and down Kingston Road while three guys with shaggy hair and wearing ratty clothes sat on the sidewalk beside the hotel. Two of them smoked; all three stared at us.

“They probably think we're drug dealers,” Anthony said, chuckling.

Tough to blame them. We rode in an Escalade. We're big. We wore jeans and hoodies. Harmless-looking enough if you're a sweet old lady who needs help carrying her groceries or something, but we also definitely looked enough like guys you stare down if this is your turf.

“So this is the place,” Anthony said, nodding at the motel. “Man. I haven't been back here in so long. I can't remember when.”

North beyond the fence there sprawls a lovely neighborhood with clean-cut lawns and one-story brick homes, and to the east lay the townhome complex, with two and three story buildings. Even though the latter was mostly brown, it looked vibrant compared to where we stood, and it rose above us.

The three guys kept staring. They talked sideways to each other.

“F—in’ sh—ty,” Anthony said, but like it’s funny, not like he’s bitter. “No place to f—ing be raising kids. That was our room. Number 29.”

He pointed to a door down and to the left of Number 29. It led to a basement that used to house a play center for kids. It had computers and games and more importantly, food—and most importantly, the Stewart brothers knew how to break in. They’d sneak down there at midnight, raid the fridge, the cabinets, the pantry.

“It was a nice break from toast, syrup, and ketchup,” Anthony said. “And you know, some days, just ketchup.”

Then one of the guys walked toward us. “Hey there, boys.”

“How you doing?” Anthony replied.

“All right,” the guy said. “Can we help you?”

“Just looking at my old stomping grounds,” Anthony said. “Is that all right?”

The guy’s eyes were green. Even they looked faded. Dead. And kind of red.

“What’d you say?”

“Just showing my friend here my old stomping grounds.”

“I don’t know you,” the guy said. “I’ve been here 15 years.”

Anthony kept smiling, kept relaxed, but inside his hoodie pockets, he took his hands and made them fists. Something strikes me as strange, in a good way: Now, he’s out of place here.

“You remember Susan Reid?” Anthony said. “That was my mom. It would’ve been 13, 14 years ago. I was here when the government used to put all the families in here.”

“I’ve been here 15 years,” the guy muttered. “They ain’t never changed nothing, buddy. It’s all the same thing, the same f—ing thing. Same old, same old thing.”

“Yeah,” Anthony said. “So, we got outta here. We actually made it outta here.”

“Oh, f— yeah man.” The guy nodded, and his tone turned kind. “I’ll get outta here some day, man.”

Anthony’s fists uncoiled. “Hey, all the power to ya.”

The guy mumbled something incoherent, then said, maybe to Anthony or himself or an imaginary person, “If somebody don’t kill ya first, buddy.”

Then he gave us a little wave. “You take care.”

Anthony nodded. The guy turned to walk back to his buddies, the seat of his jeans ragged and torn, not by fashion designers but by the cement of the sidewalk, where he sank back down to the ground.

Anthony turned and looked at the fence. It really was a wall for a different kind of prison. Anthony walked toward it. He said it’s good that he’s come back, good that we’ve seen so much of their old life. It’s been a visceral reminder of why he and his brother fought and still fight.

He grabbed the top of the fence and, like he would as a kid, lifted himself up. Only this time, under the weight of what he’d become, the wood cracked.

“Man,” Anthony said. “I’d f—in’ break this fence now.”

CHRIS SHAKES HIS HEAD.

“Man, the memories of that place,” he says, chuckling. “I can’t believe you guys went back there.”

But however rough the memories, however little he wants to talk about them, Chris like Anthony wants to do something about the places where they happened. He also wants to f—in’ break down those fences. Help other kids get away. Chris just prefers to focus on that—the good now and to come, not the bad that was.

Sometimes he takes his sisters swimming in the Thompson Hotel's pool. It's on the roof. You grow up fighting undesirables in the worst parts of the city and then you can take your baby sisters swimming somewhere above everything—yeah, you want to just stay up there and, you hope, help some others get there, too. Where finally you can have a life that's both fun and safe, where you can sleep soundly through the night in a room that's an elevator ride from the top of the world, where you always wear clothes that fit you, on and off the ice, from your helmets to your sweaters to your skates.

If you so choose, that is. Some roots are so important that even Chris lets them be. “Still to this day, I've got a smaller foot than my brother,” he says. “I've always worn his hand-me-downs, and I still wear his size. Now I'm in the NHL, and could have any pair of skates I want, but I still want the ones that are too big for me, because wearing those has got me here. Weird as it sounds, but that's what I'm comfortable with. I wear a size 12 when I'm supposed to be an 11, just because I've worn his skates that have been too big for me all my life.”

REFERENCES

- Burns, Larry. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 22 Oct. 2011.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 23 Oct. 2011.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 24 Oct. 2011.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 29 Oct. 2011.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 30 Oct. 2011.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 31 Oct. 2011.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 15 Apr. 2012.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 16 Apr. 2012.
Castro, Ivan. Personal interview. 17 Apr. 2012.
Cauley, Greg. Personal interview. 13 Mar. 2012.
Cauley, Greg. Personal interview. 14 Mar. 2012.
Cauley, Greg. Personal interview. 15 Mar. 2012.
Cauley, Rena. Personal interview. 14 Mar. 2012.
Close, Cori. Personal interview. 24 May 2012.
Close, Cori. Personal interview. 31 Aug. 2012.
Dummar, Fred. Personal interview. 23 Oct. 2011.
Dummar, Fred. Personal interview. 24 Oct. 2011.
Duncan, Mike. Personal interview. 25 May 2012.
Duncan, Mike. Personal interview. 27 Sept. 2012.
Chapman, Reggie. Personal interview. 17 Apr. 2011.
Fields, A.J. Personal interview. 14 Sept. 2012.
Fields, A.J. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Fields, A.J. Personal interview. 16 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Anthony. Personal interview. 14 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Anthony. Personal interview. 16 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Anthony. Personal interview. 17 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Chris. Personal interview. 14 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Chris. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Faith. Personal interview. 14 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Faith. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Faith. Personal interview. 16 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Faith. Personal interview. 17 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Faith. Personal interview. 18 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Michael. Personal interview. 14 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Michael. Personal interview. 16 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Nirra. Personal interview. 24 May 2012.
Fields, Nirra. Personal interview. 30 Aug. 2012.
Fields, Nirra. Personal interview. 31 Aug. 2012.
Fields, Nirra. Personal interview. 1 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Nirra. Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Shawn. Personal interview. 14 Sept. 2012.

Fields, Shawn. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Shawn. Personal interview. 16 Sept. 2012.
Fields, Shawn. Personal interview. 17 Sept. 2012.
Forrest, Ryan. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Galvis, Evelyn. Personal interview. 4 Nov. 2011.
Howard, Tommy. Personal interview. 14 Mar. 2012.
Ivankovich, Dan. Personal Interview. 11 Apr. 2011.
Ivankovich, Dan. Personal Interview. 12 Apr. 2011.
Ivankovich, Dan. Personal Interview. 13 Apr. 2011.
Ivankovich, Dan. Personal Interview. 21 Apr. 2011.
John, Dexter. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Katter, Ken. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2011.
Les, Jim. Personal interview. 17 Apr. 2011.
Louis-Charles, Jean Moise. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2012.
Mitarotondo, Mike. Personal interview. 11 Apr. 2011.
Mitarotondo, Mike. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2011.
OnePatientGHI. "Bazelais Suy and Dr. Dan Ivankovich." *ABC 7 News*. YouTube, 4 July 2010.
Web. 25 Mar. 2011.
Smith, Brian. Personal interview. 15 Mar. 2012.
Stewart, Anthony. Personal interview. 11 June 2012.
Stewart, Anthony. Personal interview. 12 June 2012.
Stewart, Anthony. Personal interview. 13 June 2012.
Stewart, Chris. Personal interview. 11 June 2012.
Stewart, Chris. Personal interview. 14 June 2012.
Stewart, Norman. Personal interview. 12 June 2012.
Sullivan, Michael P. Personal interview. 15 Apr. 2012.
Sullivan, Michael P. Personal interview. 16 Apr. 2012.
Sullivan, Michael P. Personal interview. 17 Apr. 2012.
Tavera, Joel. Personal interview. 28 Oct. 2011.
Tavera, Joel. Personal interview. 1 Oct. 2012.
Williams, Amarah. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Dorothy. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Dorothy. Personal interview. 13 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 26 Mar. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 11 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 13 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 17 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 22 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Mike. Personal interview. 27 Apr. 2011.
Williams, Stanley. Personal interview. 17 Sept. 2012.